

10-Story DETECTIVE

Vol. 1

JANUARY, 1938

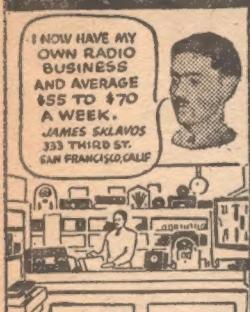
No. 1

- ★ **BULLDOG OF JUSTICE** (Novel) Ralph Powers 10
When a clever criminal lawyer's trick allowed a convicted man to walk free from the courtroom, fighting District Attorney Jack Webster had to buck both the law and gangdom.
- ★ **MURDER ON THE CUFF** Eric Lennox 41
A sensational columnist had to turn detective for ten seconds.
- ★ **THE MASKED ALIBI** John Gregory 46
State Trooper Hal Robberts played a long hunch on charred evidence.
- ★ **SATAN'S SHOWDOWN** Paul Adams 52
Belden's death scheme of freedom from his wife looked clever and simple enough to be faultless.
- ★ **SECOND-HAND SUICIDE** (Novelette) . Harry Widmer 57
The kid wanted bright lights and the glamour girls. He was ripe to be plucked by a vicious dealer in destinies.
- ★ **COCKTAILS FOR THE CORPSE** Ronald Fiegg 73
Duke Morgan, city gunman, took a whirl at mixing murder and superstition.
- ★ **BIG-HOUSE BAIT** William A. Langford 80
A year on Straight Street had made a new man of young Joe. But his former pals had plans of big-house bait in a corpse trap.
- ★ **A DATE WITH DOOM** Chester Bront 88
It was Rookie Kirk's first night on the beat alone. And stark tragedy dogged his every footstep.
- ★ **DEATH'S SIGNATURE** Cliff Howe 94
A killer tried to write off his crime.
- ★ **TRIGGER TRIBUNAL** Leon Dupont 97
Tom Fargo, parole officer, found himself to be a murderer's perfect alibi.

10-STORY DETECTIVE, published quarterly by Periodical House, Inc. Rose Wyn. President. Office of Publication, 29 Worthington Street, Springfield, Mass. Editorial and executive offices, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y. Application for Second Class Entry pending at the Post Office at Springfield, Mass. Copyright, 1937, Periodical House, Inc. For advertising rates address Ace Fiction Group, 67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y. While great care is exercised in the handling of manuscripts this magazine assumes no responsibility for their safety.

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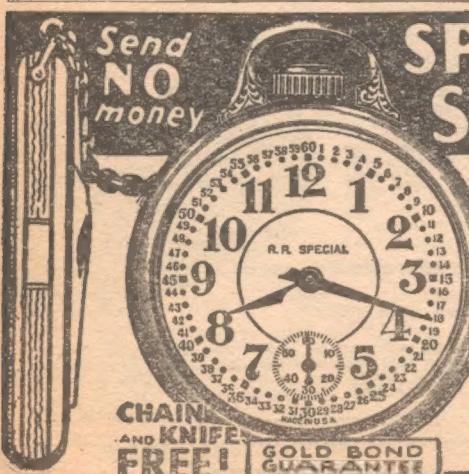
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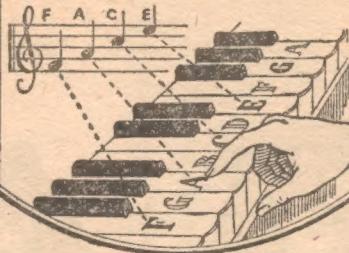
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Bulldog of Justice

Complete Detective Novel

By Ralph Powers

A clever criminal lawyer turned a jury's verdict—and a murderer walked from the Halls of Justice. But District Attorney Jack Webster still carried on the fight, bucking the law and gangdom—for he had his own iron-bound code.

CHAPTER I

THE GRIM REAPER'S VERDICT

JACK WEBSTER, District Attorney, with quickening heart, watched twelve men file solemnly from the jury room to their places in the judgment box.

He anxiously studied the inscrutable faces of the twelve as the foreman faced the bench. A strange premonition of danger tightened his nerves when he heard Judge Crawford gravely ask: "Gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?" The drawn grayness of the jurist's firm face became even more pronounced, Webster noted with growing concern, as the foreman answered: "We have."

The twelve had decided between freedom and life imprisonment for the rat-eyed defendant, Ray Natto. His indictment for grand larceny had followed three convictions on minor charges. If the foreman of the jury now pronounced one word, and not two, to convict Natto of a fourth offense, he faced, under the drastic Kernan law, a mandatory sentence of life imprisonment.

"What is your verdict, gentlemen of the jury?"

The moment speeded Webster's pulse because it was the crisis of his long months of grim endeavor to stamp out the scourge of as evil a ring of extortionists and racketeers as ever

had preyed on the city. Natto, backed by the crooked connivance of politicians he had bribed, had defied the justice of the courts with shrewdly planted graft, with crooked bondsmen. The shady skill of a powerful trial lawyer, Herbert Knox, had opened one loophole after another in the law through which he had wriggled to immunity—until Jack Webster had declared his determination to get Natto.

One by one Webster had indicted, tried and convicted four of Natto's predatory lieutenants. Step by step he had fought toward the supreme test of forcing justice upon the contemptuous Natto. The moment of victory or defeat had come, after a strenuous week-long trial, with the door locked for eighteen hours on the exhausted jury. The greasy-faced, button-eyed extortionist faced the bench now, as pale and haggard as the distinguished judge who addressed the fateful question to the jury.

Dread filled Webster that again Natto might elude the law. He had presented documentary evidence, proved by expert graphologists to be in Natto's handwriting, letters demanding blood money. The defense's countermove was the testimony of witness after witness that Natto was elsewhere on the night he had actually met Howard Brandon, broker, in a public park with a demand for one hundred



thousand dollars. Eyewitnesses! The word brought sharper bitterness to the heart of Jack Webster than any other in the lexicon of the law.

Gravely Judge Crawford had charged the jury: "Gentlemen, you have heard six witnesses state that they saw the defendant elsewhere on the night he is alleged to have extorted money from Howard Brandon. You have heard Brandon testify that the defendant is the man who demanded extortion money of him. You must carefully weigh this conflicting testimony and decide whether it condemns the defendant or clears him. You are to judge the credibility of these eye-witnesses."

Eye-witnesses! The words burned the mind of Jack Webster, echoed in his memory, as he watched the worn face of the foreman of the jury. Firm-eyed, clean-cut, with a temper as fiery as his brilliant red hair, Webster—the youngest man ever to achieve the important office of prosecutor of the district of King's County—heard the jury grant him a grim reward:

"Guilty."

Judge Henry Crawford peered at the stunned Natto and leaned forward painfully. Webster had seen the asheness of the jurist's face become more pronounced during the progress of the trial. He was sure that the man on the bench was ill and suffering. He listened anxiously as the jurist mumbled:

"This court pronounces upon the defendant the mandatory sentence of—"

Abruptly a breathy, agonized gasp broke from Judge Crawford's lips. His head dropped to the bench and lolled; his arms swung limp as he sagged. A soft, crunching sound passed through the hush of the court as the jurist sprawled to the floor. One moment of stunned astonishment held reporters, counsel and spectators motionless while they stared at an empty chair.

Webster, the first to move, strode dismayed toward the bench. The bailiff sped with him; the stenographer

sprang up; the courtroom broke into a dismayed babble. Webster bent anxiously over the limp jurist on the floor; he peered appalled into a face that was ghastly passive. He straightened, gazed at the startled men who had followed and said quietly:

"Judge Crawford is dead."

THE courtroom became a bedlam as Webster thrust clear of the court attendants. His quick thrust opened the jurist's chambers behind the court. He snapped into the telephone, into the ear of the courthouse switchboard operator: "Webster speaking. Give me my office!" He waited with mind in turmoil for the voice of his secretary to answer.

He knew that Mae Gary should be at her desk. She was on duty every moment Webster was at work, night and day. Quickly efficient, with a mind tuned to match Webster's fast decisions, she should be answering this call without a moment's delay. But she was not. The distant bell purred repeatedly, but the line remained closed.

Webster spun from the telephone. "Call Crawford's home and his doctor!" With the snapped orders, he pushed through the swinging doors of the courtroom and took the stairs four at a time. His hand gripped the knob of his office entrance hard and he opened the way to a sight that chilled his blood.

A ruddy-faced deputy sheriff, detailed to the guarding of state's evidence kept in Webster's office, lay with bleeding head under a broken-legged chair that had crushed him down. Scattered papers on the floor led Webster on a swift trail through a door with shattered pane. He glimpsed trim pumps and sleek silk past the corner of Mae Gary's desk and seized the girl's arm as she strove weakly to rise.

She clung to him dizzily, her clear blue eyes dimmed, her usually firm lips trembling, as Webster's gaze shot to the huge safe set into the wall of his inner office. In it, immediately after the jury had retired, he had stored

the extortionist letters written by Natto. Now the compartment in which he had placed them was empty. A wave of angry heat surged through him as he gripped Mae Gary's arms.

"Talk!"

"He—he came at me before I knew what was happening!" the girl blurted. "I heard the crash out there, and saw Hunter going down—then he hit me. A masked man—handkerchief across his face—a man in a top-coat. I tried to stop him, but—"

"Mae! Who was he? You saw him. You'd know him if—"

"It happened so fast!" the girl said rushingly. "I didn't see him clearly. I tried to pull him back—heard something rip, but—I'm sorry, Jack!"

"The rat who did this," Jack Webster declared grimly, "is going to be much sorrier!"

Quick steps in the outer office brought Webster's assistant, Frank Mayton, toward him. Mayton stared around, appalled, then blurted to Webster:

"Judge Cheever's taking the bench to pronounce sentence on Natto. There's hell popping down there—"

"And here!" Webster snapped. "Beat it downstairs, Frank—out this building. Try to find a man in a torn top-coat. He's got the evidence against Natto. Get after him!"

The amazed Mayton rushed from the office. Mae Gary was at the telephone now, asking for Inspector Mattison. Webster, in the outer office, pulled the broken chair away from Hunter as the deputy struggled up. He examined the ugly welt on Hunter's head and sent him staggering out for first aid. Webster's face was a furious red, his temper was flaming, when he strode back to the safe.

"Inspector Mattison," Mae Gary told him, lowering the phone, "is coming over."

"That's the way to handle this!" Webster said with bitter irony. "Just stand by until Mattison saunters into it!"

A quick examination of the safe verified his fears. Four extortionist letters, identified as Natto's handwriting, were not in the compartment nor among the papers scattered over the floor. Another drawer was open but empty; it had contained statements with which Webster hoped soon to convict one Nat Brock on the same charge that had brought a verdict of guilty against Natto. Suspicion kindled in Webster's turbulent mind as he rapidly scanned the papers he picked up.

A spot of white on the rug drew his hand. He lifted a tiny white sphere that flaked when his fingernail dug at it, bringing a pungent odor to his nostrils.

"You tore the masked man's coat," he thought aloud to the breathless Mae Gary. "Ripped his pocket, probably, and this fell out of it."

The thermometer bracketed outside Webster's window was registering the first sharp drop of temperature of the fall. It had brought many top-coats out of cedar chests and storage closets. Webster's own, for the first time this season, hung on the rack behind his desk. Webster peered at that little white sphere with disgust.

"Evidence," he declared. "And worthless!"

Mae Gary asked: "Why?"

"It means our masked man got his coat out of storage in such a hurry tonight he didn't have time to take the mothballs out of it, that's all. Did you smell anything like this when he hit you?"

"Yes," Mae Gary said it with certainty. Now she was her usual poised, capable self. "I did."

"Whoever was here won't keep that coat with him now. He'll get rid of it because of the torn pocket. That's no good. There might be an odor of naphthalene on him—but where will it be months from now, assuming I managed to find him, arrest him, indict him and bring him to trial? You can't preserve an odor that long—and it

wouldn't be conclusive evidence if you could. It's no good!"

The girl said: "I tried to pull his mask down, but that was when he hit me."

Webster smiled tightly. "Thanks for trying. You're aces." He was rewarded with a quick smile, and it had the effect of cooling his temper. "Aces," he declared again with the utmost assurance. "As a secretary and as yourself."

Mae Gary said very quietly: "Thanks, boss."

There was a quick step in the outer office, and again it was Mayton. Webster's assistant was breathless and bewildered.

"He must have gotten away clean. Nobody noticed him. He took the evidence on Natto? Good Lord! Well, we're not going to need it. Judge Cheever's going to pronounce sentence on Natto right now."

"There's a damn' good reason," Webster asserted as he strode to the door, "why that evidence was taken—in spite of the verdict."

"Funny the way Judge Crawford dropped, wasn't it?" Mayton asked as he followed. "Of course he's had angina for years, but it's damned strange that—"

"Too strange!" Webster paused, looking back at Mae Gary. "Mae, I want you to go to Judge Crawford's home in a hurry. You may have a tough time getting in because they'll be upset, but I want information. Crawford was at home while the jury was out. I want to know what he did—everything about his heart ailment. I'll be along."

Mayton exclaimed: "Good Lord, do you think that girl's a machine that never eats or sleeps? She was here all last night and all today, living on sandwiches and coffee. I'll go to Crawford's place instead and—"

"I like Mae's methods," Webster smiled through the open door. "Do you mind, Mae? Can you make it?"

"Certainly I can make it," the girl answered. "Do you think I'm a sissy?"

SHE was slipping into a woolly coat, pulling a pert felt hat on her head, even as she spoke. Webster's eyes reflected the admiration and esteem he felt for her as he hurried from the door. He pushed into the courtroom to find it still buzzing, the attendants and counsel still stunned by the shock of Judge Crawford's death. A gavel in the lean hand of Judge Joseph Cheever was rapping on the desk.

Into the hush that followed, the sharp-eyed jurymen declared: "The jury has returned a verdict of guilty against the accused. The unfortunate death of Judge Crawford turns upon me the duty of sentencing the defendant. Under the laws of this state it is mandatory that—"

"Your honor." Herbert Knox, towering tall, with eyes that surveyed the world from the eminence of his height with the cold sharpness of an eagle's, stepped to the bench briskly. "I move for a mistrial."

Judge Cheever's gesture was sharp, impatient. "To attempt to take advantage of the catastrophe of Judge Crawford's death, Mr. Knox, is, in my opinion—"

"I move for a mistrial, your honor," Knox persisted in his strident voice, "on the grounds that the present court has no jurisdiction to pronounce sentence upon the defendant. The trial is incomplete. Only the judge who presided thus far has the right to impose sentence. Under the laws of this state, a new trial must be granted."

Jack Webster studied the puzzled face of the jurist on the bench. Again his easily stirred temper sent surges of heat through his veins. His hand closed hot and hard, as he waited for the court to deliberate—hot and hard on a ball of naphthalene.

"Counsel for the defense and the Attorney for the State," Judge Cheever pronounced firmly, "will submit briefs on the motion for a mistrial. The hearing is set for December 8th. Court is adjourned."

Webster's eyes blazed at the offensive face of Ray Natto—at Natto, grinning malevolently. His fists clenched harder, his temper spurted his heart with rage as he faced Herbert Knox. The towering, lean attorney smiled with studied contempt.

"Eye-witnesses," he declared, "can give powerful direct evidence, Webster. Perhaps you'll learn just how powerful, at the new trial. My client will be absolutely cleared, I promise you."

Webster asked with bitter, double meaning: "Honestly?"

He struggled to control his temper while the contemptuous Knox and the grinning Natto strode from the courtroom. He went up the stairs, into the office, and his knuckles rapped hard on his desk.

Mayton eyeing him, remarked dryly: "Some day, when you get as mad as that, you're going to explode."

"Damned good reason!" — the words *were* an explosion. "Frank, I'm facing defeat in my most vital case. Because evidence has been stolen. Because a judge dropped dead on the bench. Because of a ruthless lawyer taking advantage of a legal situation not provided for in the statutes. What chance have we got against that crooked machine—legally?"

Mayton admitted despondently: "Not much!"

"Natto will win the new trial with his bribed eye-witnesses!"

The words stung Webster's lips as he spoke. He peered at the scattered papers, grim determination strengthening in him minute by minute. He gazed at the little ball of naphthalene on his hot palm—evidence valueless in the courts, but a thing that could become a pointer of doom outside them. He closed his hand tightly upon it, glared at Mayton and said:

"If the law can't get those crooks I can. I will! If a defective law—"

Death whispered an interruption.

A flat, cracking sound echoed in the office as a white-rimmed hole appeared

in the window-pane at Webster's back. A bullet went past his head with a breathy whine. A thump jarred the door frame. A swift succession of ominous sounds—and Jack Webster stood chilled by the wind of a killer's bullet.

CHAPTER II

MURDER MARK

WEBSTER whirled from the desk; even as he moved a second splintering concussion marked the appearance of another white-bordered hole in the pane. He snapped, "Get out of here!" to Mayton and whirled through the connecting door. Quick strides carried him to the window of the adjoining dark room. He peered into the bleak street that separated the courthouse from police headquarters, alert for furtive movement, for the glint of a gun in the light. But he saw only darkness—the black of night from which a murderer's slug had sped.

Turning back to the staring Mayton, he said with ironic casualness: "Better go home and get some sleep, Frank. And have a talk with Cheever first thing in the morning."

Mayton blurted: "Gosh, I saw that red hair of yours rifle as the bullet went past you!"—and he stared after Webster, speeding in hot anger down the stairs.

Webster's hand stole under his coat, to the 9mm. Webley he always carried, as he pressed out the entrance and slowly went down the broad stone steps. Along the gloomy street he saw no one but a thick-shouldered leanhipped man coming out of the door of police headquarters. Webster waited grimly until this familiar, slow-moving figure became Inspector Mattison, stocky legs straddled, facing him. Mattison's eyes were blacker than the night, ominously deeper.

He said wryly: "No use getting excited, Webster. We'll find the man who robbed your safe. It's only a matter of time. Leave it to me."

"I'm probably too easily aroused, inspector," Webster answered tartly. "I'm pretty jumpy when I get worked up over a little thing like a killer shooting at me with a silenced gun!"

Mattison looked mildly surprised as Webster went up the steps at his side. "That so? Somebody did that? All right, I'll look into it. He's beat it by now, of course? Well, I'll hunt him up."

"Thanks, inspector, very much," Webster retorted. "But don't let it upset you. There's all the time in the world, you know. What's the use of trying to grab him now when he wouldn't be brought to trial for months?"

Mattison observed as he plodded up the steps: "When you've been going after crooks as long as I have, Webster, you'll know there's no good of going off half-cocked. I've been in this game too long to get excited about anything any more. Let justice take its course. The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine. Take it easy, Webster."

"The mills of the gods grinding slowly," Webster observed, "is one reason why the crooks have time to scramble out of the works before they get pinched."

Mattison chuckled dryly as Webster led him into the office and indicated the documents strewn on the floor. "You're an interesting hothead," he observed, moving about. "Maybe it's the heat in you that accounts for your traveling so far so fast. Why, a few years ago, nobody ever heard of Jack Webster, and now you're D. A."

Webster sensed the penetrating undertone of Mattison's statement. He knew this slow-moving plodder possessed a wit that was a dangerously keen weapon against any man he suspected. His mind was a rapier that thrust while his words drawled and he slouched. It was reaching now for a tender spot in Jack Webster and they both knew it.

"If that's a compliment, Mattison," Webster smiled, "thanks!"

"Not at all, not at all, young fellow." The very simulation of affection in the words was a menace that Webster sensed. "You see, the department's got to take it slow and careful. We can't arrest a man without a warrant, and we can't issue a warrant without damn' good evidence. You—you go off like a firecracker, and if the force doesn't work fast enough to suit you, you take on the job yourself. I never could understand how a man like you could pop up so suddenly out of nowhere. You've certainly left your mark behind you all your life."

"I wouldn't be surprised, inspector," Webster parried. "I'm flattered by your interest in me personally."

"Naturally, I'm interested," Mattison went on, looking at the scattered papers. "A fighting D.A., with two fists and fast legs and a terror to any crook he starts after—why, sure! Where's your home town, Webster? Where'd you go to law school? What did you do before you came here?"

Webster's smile tightened. "We're forgetting something, aren't we, inspector? State's evidence has been stolen from the district attorney's safe. A murderer took two shots at me with a silenced twenty-two. That's the business of the moment, isn't it?"

"That's right," Mattison drawled. "I've often noticed you don't want to talk much about yourself. You're too modest, Webster—too modest."

"Let it go at that," Webster suggested grimly.

Mattison leaned on the desk. "I'll head back to the office and see what I can do about this. There's one thing I've been meaning to mention to you, Webster. Just in a friendly way, you know. No hard feelings, of course. But the way you disregard formalities and regulations and go out after crooks yourself—that's dangerous. You might get into trouble. Ever thought of that?"

"You mean," Webster asked, "that I might break the law myself, going after crooks as I do, and then you'd have the job of giving me the works

TSD

—which you wouldn't like—is that the idea?"

Mattison's lips pursed. "Yes," he admitted. "That's it. Ever thought of that, Webster?"

Webster said levelly: "I'll take my chances. The law is imperfect, Mattison—we both know that. It is full of holes and flaws and senseless procedures that help crooks defeat justice. Crooks use the law as a cover, and guilty men are acquitted, innocent men condemned. We're both in it. We know that 'law' doesn't mean 'justice' as it should."

"Well, we make mistakes," Mattison drawled. "But we do pretty well in the long run." He sauntered to the door, and turned his ominously black eyes back at Webster. "You might make a mistake, too, you know—and that'd be pretty bad."

JACK WEBSTER'S sharp eyes probed into the blackness of Mattison's, striving to read the inspector's inscrutable mind, chilled by a sense of danger. He kept staring at the door after Mattison left. He saw one pocket of Mattison's coat sagging; and he lowered himself into his chair slowly, filled with a foreboding of disaster. His hand moved automatically toward a corner of his blotter where a glass paperweight always rested, a thing he was in the habit of toying with when lost in thought.

He stared, chilled anew—for the paper-weight was gone. Gone—and Mattison had left the office with one pocket sagging heavily.

Webster spun in his chair and turned alert eyes out the window. He saw Mattison appear on the courthouse steps and amble slowly across the street. After the inspector pushed in through the headquarters entrance, Webster's eyes rose to the window of a corner office opposite. That was Mattison's. Across the chasm of the street they could see each other's desks—the inspector with the ominous black eyes and the district attorney who had been warned against a "mistake."

Webster's hand snapped out the light when he saw Mattison stride into the office in the headquarters building. He could see only part of the inspector, but he was aware that another man had entered the room. That Mattison's arm was extending toward him, Webster's mind ached to hear the words that were being spoken in that office as he watched.

They were:

"Take this paper-weight and see what fingerprints you can find on it. Give me good, clear photographs. Never mind whose it is. Do the best job you know how, and let me have it quick."

He turned to the typewriter sitting on a leaf of his desk, fed in a headquarters letterhead, and his face grew grim as he hit the keys. Webster, peering across the street from the dark window, could not see the words on the paper:

DIRECTOR, DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE,
WASHINGTON, D. C.

Sir:

I am enclosing photographs of a set of fingerprints of a man I suspect of connection with some crime about ten years ago. He claims to come from Pennsylvania. Please check your files exhaustively and inform me of your findings at your earliest convenience.

I am, sir, yours respectfully,

Mattison put the letter before him and took up a pen. He gazed out the window, at the dark office of the district attorney—but he could not see Webster watching him in the blackness. Absorbed, he tugged at his memory, tried to remember back through the years, to connect Webster's face with another person, another name.

Strive as he might, Mattison could not find that elusive fragment of recollection. Had it been the lineup—a parade of the accused, in which a man with Webster's face had appeared? Had it been in connection with a crime in some other city—a photograph in the newspapers, perhaps? Mattison had searched the newspaper files in vain. He had relentlessly hunted

through the police records, but each lead had become obscured in the darkness of the past. It haunted him—that indefinable memory—as he gazed at the dark window beyond where Webster stood unseen, watching.

He said aloud: "This'll do it!" and signed his name to the letter.

WEBSTER felt an uncanny apprehension as he drove rapidly toward the home of Judge Crawford on the outskirts of the city—a persistent hunch that he was being followed. A coldness like the breath of the bullet, which had lightninged past his head in his office, played over his scalp. He searched the shadows as he turned his car into the broad driveway; but the blackness of the night was an enigma.

The maid who admitted him to the stricken home led him into the library where Mae Gary was waiting. She was at his side at once, giving him a neat array of notes already prepared. Her eyes were weary but alert; and Webster's hand lingered on her cool fingers as he scanned the neatly written lines.

"Mrs. Crawford," the girl explained, "says that this wasn't entirely unexpected—the judge had been suffering from angina. I tried to get more information. This note about the Scotch ale—"

Webster was rapidly reading it:

"There was a personality sketch about the judge in the *Bulletin* recently. Home life of the great—that sort of thing. In it there's a line about the judge's always taking a glass of ale with his dinner. A case of an imported Scotch brand was delivered here soon afterward—compliments of the distributor."

Webster shifted to another note.

"The judge liked it, and ordered more. Tonight, while the jury was out, he came home for dinner and had the first bottle out of the new case. There's more in the refrigerator. Mrs. Crawford didn't know what I was getting at—I'm not sure of it myself."

"But," Webster remarked dryly, "you're very close to being a mind reader, Mae. How did you—?"

"Perhaps it was an accident that the judge's collapse came at such a lucky time for Natto," the girl answered crisply. "You suspect he was murdered. It would have to be poison. A mistrial, evidence stolen—and Natto goes free—but Jack Webster's on the job."

"Mae." Webster asked it softly. "Do you like it—working night and day, missing meals, going without sleep, running the chance of some crazy crook getting you because you're with me in this thing?"

"I thrive on it," she answered.

His hand closed on hers. "You're the only one who knows what I'm driving at—who doesn't try to cure me of my obsession to make the law the instrument of justice it should be. It's in me, so deep-rooted that it can never be eradicated. Nobody understands that but you."

She began: "I lo—" and broke off, as the red of her cheeks deepened, with "—admire you for it."

"I need that."

"Jack." Mae Gary smiled. "I've a question to ask you—in eighteen minutes. Not until then. You can refuse, of course, but—please don't."

"Ask it now."

She shook her head firmly. "Eighteen minutes—can't until then."

"Then, in the meantime," he asked, answering her smile, "where's the kitchen?"

"This way," Mae Gary said, and led him toward it.

It was a fresh white room, with a huge electric refrigerator standing between two windows. Webster opened the door and cold air cascaded around his ankles. "More here?" he asked. "Where, Mae?"

The girl stooped beside him, exclaimed: "There was—a few minutes ago! I saw it. Eleven bottles—half a case less the one the judge had for dinner—in the bottom."

"This time," Webster said grimly, rising, "the evidence is stolen before it gets into the hands of the state. It can't be far and—"

He broke off, listening. With a quick turn to the kitchen door, he opened a view upon spreading grounds, noting that the entrance would yield from the outside. A night wind, rustling through the elms on the grounds, carried a crackling sound, softened by the distance. It was the noise of splintering glass.

Webster hurried; Mae Gary kept at his side. The estate of the late jurist reached over a wooded knoll. In the gloom a brook trickled musically. Webster gestured a warning to the girl, crouched when he reached the crest, peered at a winding line of water twinkling faintly in the starlight. His heart quickened as he gazed intently at a shadowy figure bending over the rippling bank. And again, more sharply, came the crash of shattering glass.

Webster bounded over. A bush rustled in the darkness. His hand slipped toward his Webley when the sound brought a gasp from the crouching figure. Gun-metal twinkled in the light as Webster broke into a run. A dart of flame flashed; a bullet whipped over Webster's shoulder; his Webley echoed.

The slugs crossed in the gloom, and the black figure leaped the brook. Webster's bound carried him across it. Hot wind fanned his cheek as another bullet whistled. As he followed the darting figure, bushes tripped him. He sprang up, muttering maledictions, hearing the snarl of a motor. When he reached the mesh fence, a car was speeding in the street without lights.

Webster aimed swiftly, fired twice; but the thick blackness obscured his target. The car roared around a bend in the drive as he sped back. Mae Gary's anxious call brought his breathless: "Okay! Call Mattison—the prowlers!" He heard the girl running through the grass as he paused at the edge of the brook.

He tore off a paper match, hearing excited voices in the house. Studying the ground in the flickering light, he saw broken glass glittering among the rocks of the brook bed. Other fragments twinkled on an area of wet earth. Webster slipped the jagged neck of a bottle into his pocket, noting the plain cap. He scooped up moist dirt, found a used envelope in his pocket, packed it full.

Mae Gary hurried back, paused, anxiously watched his eyes glitter in the fading light of a second match. "Was it my imagination," he asked, "or did I smell naphthalene in the kitchen?"

"I thought I did!"

He declared tightly: "We've got to have something better than that. Take this envelope, Mae. Find Dr. Norton, wherever he is, and get him into his lab no matter what he's doing." Dr. Timothy Norton was the city toxicologist. "After that," he added, "you might use some sleep."

"You're not hurt?" the girl asked anxiously. "Jack—are you?"

"Missed me," he answered laconically. "I suppose Mattison's sending a man out—there being no hurry. Slip back to the car, Mae. I'll be right with you."

HE went into the house as the girl hurried off, and strove to reassure the distracted Mrs. Crawford that there was no cause for alarm. He looked again in the kitchen, for a possible clue to the prowler, but could find nothing. He returned thoughtfully to the car, slipped behind the wheel, and started off. Mae Gary looked at him, and said nothing while he drove.

"I'm going to drop off at home," he said at last. "Use this car to get to Dr. Norton's."

"Eighteen minutes are up," the girl said softly, looking at her watch, as Webster drew the car to the curb in front of the small house in which he lived. "That makes it one minute past midnight."

"Yes?" curiously.

"It's my birthday. I can do anything I want to now, can't I? I'm going to ask you a question."

"Is it important?"

"The most—most important thing in the world to me, Jack!" She said it in a whispering rush. "I've got to ask you because you've never asked me."

"What is it, Mae?"

"Will you marry me?"

Jack Webster gazed at the girl's red cheeks, at her redder lips, at the shining light of her eyes—and agony pinched his heart. He sat silent, stunned by the answer he knew he was forced to make. He started to speak and could not. A rush of warmth from his heart coursed to the hand closed tightly on the girl's trembling fingers; and he sat wordless until Mae Gary asked:

"Don't you love me, Jack?"

"Mae! Mae, darling, listen. Love you? With all my heart. Mae, it's been burning in me for months—ever since I came to know you—that question. The question you've asked me—that I've wanted to ask you—and couldn't."

"Why couldn't you ask me?"

"Mae, there's no one else—you must believe that." His hand crushed hers and he gazed deep into her lucid eyes. "There's no one but you. There never will be, I swear it. Mae, there's nothing I want more—nothing!"

"Why can't we—"

"Marriage is impossible for me, Mae—impossible!"

"Why, Jack?" softly. "Why?"

Jack Webster's tortured mind flashed back through the years—it brought him a picture of a night bitterly cold, of a bleak railroad yard, of the end of an exhausting journey for a man more than ten years younger than Jack Webster was now—a journey on the rods of a freight car. The Christmas holidays had urged him to return to his home near Philadelphia by the only means available to him—the stolen ride of a tramp. Jack Webster saw himself in that painful flash of memory—penniless, shivering, aching for food—a being who had

since ceased to exist, whose name was Thomas Neill.

He heard it again as he sat with fingers clinging yearningly to the hand of Mae Gary—the crack of a shot that had burned the brand of murder upon him.

The gun's report, carrying softly over the sooty snow of the railroad terminal, had sounded the death of a railroad detective. Flashing torches had swung damning beams upon the man who was then Thomas Neill—stabbed him as he strove desperately to elude the searching crew who came swarming through the yards. Hard hands had trapped him. Days of agony had followed. He had heard tragedy speak twice within an hour: the verdict of a jury pronouncing him guilty of murder in the second degree; and the news that the shock of his disgrace had ended his mother's life.

Jack Webster vividly remembered the words of the judge instructing the jury upon whose decision his entire life had depended:

"You have heard three witnesses declare that the defendant fired the fatal shot. They have each stated that they saw the defendant commit the crime of murder. Opposed to this, you must weigh the evidence that the revolver found in the snow did not bear the defendant's fingerprints, and his unsupported statement that he did not fire the shot. You must decide whether or not these three eye-witnesses to the tragedy are credible."

Eye-witnesses! The word brought bitterness to the heart of the man who had become Jack Webster. Eye-witnesses had seen him commit a crime he had not committed. Eye-witnesses had damned him with a sentence of life imprisonment—mistakenly. Yet no eye had been keen enough to balk the desperate attempt which had turned him into hunted fugitive.

A swiftly swung chair, the crash of a splintering window blending with the barking of police guns, had sounded the overture to months of hungry hiding and furtive moves. While head-

lines declared NEILL ESCAPES COURT ROOM WHEN SENTENCED, the man who now was Jack Webster had huddled in bleak holes, shuddering with the biting cold and the agony of starvation. The memory was delirium in the mind of the District Attorney of King's County.

Once safe beyond the boundaries of the state, once the furor had passed and a changed name had enabled Jack Webster to find a job, he had determined to make himself expert in the vagaries of the law which had condemned him while innocent. He had followed an unconquerable determination to make the word "law" mean "justice."

Not the slightest clue had ever come to light to point to the identity of the man who had actually fired the shot that had brought conviction for murder upon Thomas Neill. There was no hope that the truth would ever be learned. The years had formed a baffling maze that could not be penetrated to the real killer. Perhaps by now death had sealed the lips of the guilty man against confession. It was a scar of which Jack Webster could never rid himself.

Yet the years had not removed the danger that Jack Webster's real identity might become known. The charge

of murder still held against Thomas Neill and time could never outlaw it. A life sentence still awaited him; and if the truth were learned, Jack Webster must serve it. If the secret of the District Attorney of King's County were ever revealed, Jack Webster would become Thomas Neill, convicted murderer.

He had exerted all the keenness of his mind upon the bonds that connected him with that dread past; he had severed them one by one; but the possibility that one might remain haunted him. In some way he could not dream now, the past might rise at any moment to damn him; he could ask no one to share it with him—least of all, the girl he loved.

And Mae Gary had asked. "Why can't you marry me, Jack?"

"Mae, Mae!" he blurted. "In all the world there's nothing I want more—but I can't! I can't!"

He shouldered from the car, blinded with anguish, and strode stiffly to the front of his dark house. He fumbled with the key, stepped into deeper gloom, and stood shocked with despair, heart pounding. He did not move until he heard the car move away; until the girl he loved had gone. Suddenly a wild impulse seized him, to rush after her, to tell her, to dare to ask

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her to share the danger with him. His hand gripped the knob hotly; but suddenly it went cold.

He remembered—saw as clearly as though they were staring at him now—the black, ominous eyes of Inspector Mattison.

CHAPTER III

THE UNDERCOVER AIDE

JACK WEBSTER snapped lights, strode to the rear of the little house that was his home. He lived here alone, with a motherly old housekeeper to tidy the rooms with Webster's never catching a glimpse of her. He stepped into a closet in the hallway, and lifted the receiver of a little independent telephone, and touched a red button.

This line was less than a hundred feet long; it trailed into a room located above the garage at the rear of the grounds. There, Webster knew, Ted Brown was hidden. Brown was a hard-muscled, ruddy faced young man who had become Webster's assistant in matters of extra-legal justice. The room above the garage was a haven in which he lived in secret, always ready to obey Webster's slightest command with dogged loyal zeal. His voice answered on the line:

"Okay, skipper."

Webster said quietly: "Teddy, I want Nat Brock watched."

"Brock!" the hushed voice answered. "There ain't any guy I'd rather spot—you know that, skipper. What do you want him for?"

"No legal charge can cover the case at this point, Teddy," Webster explained. "Perhaps I can find proof enough to charge him with murder—but I doubt it. Legally or not, we've got to get him somehow. Your job's to keep an eye on him. When you spot him, call me, either here or at the office."

"Right, skipper!"

Webster stepped from the closet and went into the living-room, to the telephone connected with the city system. He waited, listening to the hum of a

motor from the garage. He heard Ted Brown drive away along the alley flanking the rear of the house, and smiled with cold satisfaction, knowing that Brown would stick to the trail with dogged persistence. As the sound of the car vanished, Webster dialed the number of police headquarters and asked for Inspector Mattison.

"Would I be rushing things," he asked wryly, "if I asked whether you've got any lead on the man who's trailing me around with a silenced gun, inspector?"

Mattison drawled over the line: "Take your time, Webster. We'll get him. Just leave it to me. What makes you think he's still trying to get you?"

"A feeling," Webster answered, "that I'm being watched. There's no legal proof, of course, inspector, but that would-be killer is a rod man for Natto. Natto is taking desperate measures to beat a life rap. Being shot at, inspector, is something that makes me mad."

"Sure, sure," Mattison drawled. "I'll take care of this. You're a better state's attorney alive than dead. I told you that before you ever started out to get Natto. Have you got any evidence that one of his mob shot at you—evidence enough so's I can swear out a warrant to arrest him?"

Webster answered: "No evidence, inspector — except common sense, which is not admissible in a court of law. There are not," he added wryly, "any eye-witnesses."

Mattison drawled: "Well, I'll assign a man to guard you."

"No, thanks, inspector," Webster answered with a tight smile. "He'd only cramp my style."

"Hmpff!" Mattison said. "If one of Natto's rod men puts a bullet into you, there probably won't be evidence enough to arrest him. How easily will you rest in your grave knowing that? Don't be a damned fool!"

"Being a damned fool," Webster observed, "is evidently my greatest talent."

He left the telephone and paced the room anxiously. Natto's ruthlessness carried a bitter undercurrent through his flow of thoughts as he moved back and forth, baffled by the prospect of constructing a legally presentable case against that predatory crook. His anger stirred; a rankling torment filled him when, after an interval, the telephone rang.

His quiet "Yes?" brought an answer in the voice of Mae Gary.

"I'm calling from Dr. Norton's lab, Jack," the tireless secretary said breathlessly. "I got him out of bed and made him come here—and it was worth it. You're right—Judge Crawford was poisoned!"

Webster heard the heavy voice of the toxicologist rumble over the wire. "Please understand that my findings are no proof that any murder has been committed. I have simply applied Reinisch's test to the wet earth you submitted, and I find traces of arsenic."

Webster asked swiftly: "Arsenic administered over a period of time will result in death through collapse, won't it, Dr. Norton?"

"In certain cases. But please remember I found the arsenic in the dirt. Probably the ale which Miss Gary mentioned, spilled there, accounts for it—arsenic is soluble in beer—but there's no proof of it. You have very slight evidence to justify an autopsy on Judge Crawford."

The voice of Mae Gary returned. "Your mind reader is still on the job. The Scotch ale is imported by Hiker and Company in this city—a small concern. A man named Max Connor is sales manager. He's on his way to your office now."

"And you," Webster told the girl, "are on your way to bed. Aren't you?"

Softly came: "Good night, darling."

WEBSTER left the house hurriedly. His weary glance up and down the street found empty shadows. There was no suggestion of a lurking killer in the darkness; yet,

while Webster sought a taxi, he felt that uncanny, cold prickling of his scalp which warned him that unseen eyes were watching him. It persisted even after a cab picked him up and carried him toward the formidable, white stone courthouse.

Entering his office, he glanced across the street to see the slow-moving but indefatigable Mattison still at his desk. He heard footfalls on the stairway and took up the telephone as it rang. The voice on the line was Ted Brown's.

"On the job, skipper."

"Good, Teddy!"

"Nat Brock's at the Sunrise Bar, one of his hangouts. I can't get near him—he'd recognize me—but I've got him spotted. Do I keep him in sight?"

"You forget about sleeping and eating, Teddy. Shadow him wherever he goes. I'm looking for a sniper who's trailing me around with a silenced gun, waiting for a chance to drop me, but Brock's probably not the man. Keep him in sight and—"

"Slick Perles is with Brock, skipper—another of Natto's sneaky side-kicks."

Webster observed grimly: "I'll take care of that angle. Brock's your man, Teddy—and phone if the trail gets hot."

"With a chance of getting that crook, I'll never let him slip me!"

Knuckles were rapping on the door when Webster lowered the phone. He opened the way and peered at the thin-faced, shifty-eyed caller. There was an edge of insolence in the squeaky voice which said:

"I'm Max Connor. What the hell d'you wanna see me about?"

Webster gestured Connor to a chair, dug into his top-coat pocket, and held the broken neck of a bottle toward his caller. He pointed to the plain cap which was still in place and asked crisply:

"Can you identify that?"

"No."

"You have the agency for Highland Ale in this city. This is a part of a Highland Ale bottle, isn't it? The name's stamped in the glass."

"I guess it is."

"Is that a Highland Ale cap, that plain one? That's a matter you'll have to tell the truth about, Connor, because I can check it a thousand ways."

Connor mumbled: "Highland Ale has caps with a picture of a girl in kilts on 'em."

"Which means this bottle of ale was opened, then recapped—is that it?"

"I don't know nothin' about it."

Webster straightened. "Make yourself comfortable, Mr. Connor. You have nothing to be uneasy about—only the charge of being an accessory before the fact of first degree murder."

Connor widened his shifty eyes and blurted: "What the hell're you talkin' about?"

Webster pressed his questions. "Did you send a complimentary case of Highland Ale to Judge Crawford? Did you know the caps had been removed, poison dropped in, and new caps put on? What about the second case Judge Crawford ordered—all bottles with this plain cap instead of the originals? Who made the switch? Tell the truth!"

Connor mumbled: "I'd have to look at the records. I don't know nothin' about it. I don't know nothin'—nothin'."

Webster leaned forward intently. "Have you ever been in the death house, Connor? Have you ever seen a man fry? Do you know how it's done? They shave the back of your head so you get the jolt in the brain. They strap you around the legs and put a mask on your face. It's cold in there—until they throw the switch. You feel it hit you, feel your flesh burn—smell it burning—while you sit there frying Have you ever thought of that, Connor?"

Connor jerked up, staring, and Webster followed with gleaming eyes.

"What're you talkin' about?"

"I'm talking about what's going to happen to you for being an accessory to a murder. You know who put arsenic in the ale that was sent to Judge Crawford. You're as guilty as the man who put it in. That's the law, Connor—and I'm the man who's going to send you to the chair if you don't talk!"

Connor blurted: "I ain't under arrest! You can't make me talk! I got a right to have a lawyer!"

Webster's open palm slapped Connor's face. Connor recoiled, whimpering, then made a crazy try to strike back. Webster's tempered muscles broke the attempt. His hand clamped hard on Connor's throat. Again his palm slapped blindingly across Connor's face.

"You're innocent, are you? You're fighting back like an innocent man. You're facing me without being afraid—like an innocent man. The law's on your side at this moment, Connor—why don't you make the most of it? Or would you rather talk and beat the rap? Talk—instead of frying in the hot chair and feeling your flesh burn?"

"Please, don't!" Connor quailed against the wall. "I don't know nothin' about it. Brock took a case of ale, that's all, then had our truck pick it up and take it to Crawford's. He had the second case ready the same way. I don't know nothin' else about it!"

Webster snapped: "You're coming with me!"

HIS thrust sent Connor reeling into the outer office. His eyes blazed with contempt, his face flamed with the heat of his volcanic temper as he went down the steps after Connor. He forced Connor across the street, into the massive structure that housed police headquarters. He shoved Connor into an office and came grimly to a stop, facing the ominous black eyes of Inspector Mattison.

Mattison drawled: "Hello, Webster. What's coming off here? Is this man under arrest? Have you got a warrant for him? What's the charge?"

"A warrant," Webster answered quickly, "is exactly what I'm here for." He spoke rapidly, word crowding word, while Connor shifted in frantic uneasiness from foot to foot, Mattison's black eyes studying him shrewdly. "I want a warrant for Nat Brock's arrest, on first degree murder."

Mattison's head wagged. "From the looks of this bird you've brought in," he said, "he could have you up for assault and battery and get away with it."

Webster asked grimly: "Do I get that warrant, inspector?"

Mattison frowned. "Webster, you know the law—except when that hot head of yours takes fire, and then you're apt to forget it. If Crawford was murdered, I want to get the killer as badly as you do—worse, because Crawford was one of my dearest friends. I'll do it, too—in time. But you haven't got a case now, Webster. I can't give you a warrant."

"I'm certain that Judge Crawford was poisoned by arsenic dissolved in the ale Nat Brock doctored—that Crawford's death is saving Ray Natto from life imprisonment."

"Listen, Webster," Mattison wagged a weary gesture. "Have you any evidence of arsenic in Judge Crawford's body? No, you haven't. What're you going to do—order an autopsy? You've the power to demand it, Webster—but you won't do it if I can stop you. And I'm going to stop you—until you've a damned sight more proof than you've got now."

Webster exclaimed: "What?"

"Sure, you can demand it, Webster," Mattison drawled on, "but I don't think you'll get it done, as matters stand now. Crawford and Dr. Autumn, the Medical Examiner, and me—we're the oldest men in the city government. We've seen so many district attorneys come and go, we can't remember the names of 'em all. Jack Webster started to set the world on fire about ten years ago, and the three of us—we've been close friends for three times that long. If I say

to old Doc Autumn, 'I think Webster's going off half-cocked about this autopsy on the judge,' he'll agree with me, and find some way of getting around it."

"But—"

"Because he doesn't want the ghastly job of cutting into the brain and stomach of a man who was as close to him as a brother, and he won't allow any of his assistants to do it. I think that's how it stands, Webster. You'll have to have damn' powerful proof before you'll get an autopsy performed on Crawford. It would be outrageous cruelty to Crawford's family."

Webster declared tightly: "In spite of all that, I'm going to see Crawford's murderer get what's coming to him—I'm going to prove he died of arsenic poisoning."

Mattison's eyes were searching. "Calm down, Webster. Doc Norton told me there's no conclusive proof arsenic was in the ale. If there was, you have no proof that Brock is the man who put it in. Even if he did, you can't prove that the ale he doctored is the ale the judge drank. That's pretty thin circumstantial evidence—and you have no eye-witnesses to any part of it, have you?"

Bitterly Webster echoed: "Eye-witnesses!"

"See how it stands, Webster? You can't connect Brock with this thing, and you're still farther from connecting Natto with it. Better back down and leave this to me. You might have the strongest moral conviction in the world—but that's not legal evidence."

Webster agreed grimly: "That I know!"

Mattison turned to smile crookedly at the nervous Connor. "Well?" he drawled. "If you're going to charge Webster with felonious assault, this is the time to do it. If you're not—clear out!"

Connor's shifty eyes turned to Webster. The bruise across his jowl grew more vivid as his gaunt face paled. His swollen lips fumbled with

words stopped by Webster's clear voice.

"Go ahead, Connor. Take advantage of your legal right. That'll bring the case to trial and get the facts about the doped ale into the court record. Why don't you speak up? Listen. If you're smart, you'll turn state's evidence. But if you try to skip, I'll follow you and drag you back no matter where you hole in. Felonious assault, Connor—how about it?"

Connor turned abruptly and snatched at the door knob. His quick steps sounded in the corridor as the door slammed. Webster smiled tightly in Mattison's smouldering eyes.

"My cards are on the table, inspector," the district attorney declared. "I'm out to get Brock and Natto any way I can get them. You may get me in the process, but I'll get them first." He strode to the door, turned back grimly. "Some undertaker in town," he added coolly, "is going to get an order for coffins for two."

"It'd be too bad, Webster," Mattison drawled, "if you made a hot-headed mistake."

Webster's smile tightened. He went back to the desk, peering at a circle of glass that lay on Mattison's blotter. He asked ironically:

"Isn't that mine, Mattison — that paper-weight? I'm missing one exactly like it from my office."

Mattison's eyes glinted. "Yes, it's yours, Webster," he answered. "When I'm looking for evidence, I sometimes pick up things absentmindedly. I carried this out of your office the other night. I thought maybe the robber's fingerprints might be on it."

"Were there," Webster asked tightly, "fingerprints?"

Mattison drawled: "I'm checking up on that now. I'll let you know."

Lips curved hard, Webster said bitterly, "Thanks!" He took the paper-weight from Mattison's steady hand. His fingers gripped it tightly as he strode from the office.

Mattison sat, smile fading, eyes brightening grimly. He touched a but-

ton on his desk and was still peering at the door through which Webster had gone when a blue-shirted man stepped into his office.

"I'm expecting a letter from the Department of Justice, Moore," he said in a low tone. "When it comes, see that I get it—no matter where I happen to be—the fastest way possible."

Then, slowly, shrewdly, he began to smile again.

WEBSITE stepped from a cab in front of his home—and again felt the prickling of indefinable dread which warned him some one was watching him—a killer lurking in the shadows. He pointed the key into the lock of the entrance; but to his surprise, the door swung open. He stepped in, startled, seeing a litter of papers on the floor of the room beyond. He moved toward his desk — and saw that it had been rifled.

Its drawers were out; papers were scattered. The desk clock had been knocked to the floor. Webster's glance, first at its face, then at his wristwatch, told him that the search had been made only a few minutes previous. He was striding out hastily, his temper flaming, when quick steps sounded on the rear porch and a husky voice called in: "Skipper!"

Webster hurried to the firm-bodied young man who sidled in. Ted Brown's eyes were wide with wonder. He paused to blurt:

"Brock broke in here, skipper — your own place! He sneaked in from the alley. I didn't know what to do—tried to call you—I was starting in after him when you showed up. For Lord's sake, skipper, what's Brock trying to pull off?"

"Trying to get something on me!" Webster answered angrily. "Where is he now, Teddy?"

"He beat it out when your taxi stopped. I saw him going up the stairs to my place over the garage. He must be there now, skipper!"



Webster turned startled as a bell rang. On the pane of the entrance he saw a man's shadow, arm raised to the call button. He started toward it and ordered crisply:

"Slip out and watch your door, Teddy. If Brock starts out again, nail him. Careful!"

"I'll get that guy!" Brown promised it grimly as he slipped out the back entrance.

Jack Webster quickly closed the door of his study as he looked again at the shadow on the entrance pane. "Careful!" he had warned Ted Brown, and now his head spun with dread. The need for caution bore upon them both, for Ted Brown was a fugitive from the law, an escaped convict charged with murder. Jack Webster alone held the secret of Brown's presence in the city. He was the district attorney who had sent Brown up the river—but the secret was one which would never pass his lips. He was thinking anxiously of the loyal Brown as he looked at the shadow on the door and took slow steps.

The bond that held Webster and Brown strongly together was the mutual danger of discovery—the constant, hovering threat of the chair for Brown and life imprisonment for Webster.

Once Ted Brown had been a cop under the orders of Inspector Mattison. He had built up an enviable record, then had resigned to accept an offer as detective with a private investigating agency. Working on a case of daring extortion, a dangerous trail had led him to Brock and Natto. Brown's career had ended abruptly when the grim Inspector Mattison found his fingerprints on the police positive that lay beneath the body of a man shot through the heart.

Brown had desperately fought the charge of murder. District Attorney Jack Webster, handling his first homicide case, had listened to Brown's lawyer argue that Brown's gun had been stolen to use as a plant, that the

victim, one "Ice" Cling, though a henchman of Natto's, was also an underworld foe of Nat Brock. But the attempt to turn suspicion on Brock had ended in failure.

Webster's duty had obliged him to present the fingerprints on the gun as damning evidence, against Brown, though in his heart he had felt a moral certainty that the ex-cop was guiltless. The jury had brought Webster unwanted victory with a verdict of "Guilty"—a word condemning Brown to the chair.

Webster remembered, as he approached the door, reading with unconcealed satisfaction the startling newspaper headlines announcing the escape of Ted Brown while on his way to the state prison. He recalled the night when, on one of his investigating prowls among the dives of the city, he had found a bewhiskered vagabond quaking with cold, sickened with hunger, huddling behind garbage cans in an alley.

Jack Webster had looked at Ted Brown that wretched night, and had seen Thomas Neill, a hunger-tortured fugitive from so-called justice.

He had not revealed his discovery to Inspector Mattison because he was convinced of the innocence of the man he had convicted. Secretly he had brought Brown to his home. He had furnished the room above the garage as a haven for the man whom the law was hunting. District Attorney Webster had assumed the risk of harboring a fugitive from justice.

The pathetically grateful Brown had become Webster's under-cover partner even while the law hunted him. In secret comradeship with the district attorney who had sent him up the river, Brown was crouched now somewhere in the blackness behind the house—hiding from the danger of discovery while at the same time watching a criminal enemy of Webster's.

WEBSTER pulled the door open, smiled grimly at the fattish face high-lighted against the gloom of the

street, and said: "Good evening, Flarigan."

Big Tom Flarigan rumbled: "I want to talk with you, Webster, about something important."

Webster's anxious mind was on Brock; his temper was still hot. Impatiently he began: "Suppose I see you at your office first thing in the morning, Flarigan, and—"

"This," the huge man interrupted heavily, "is too important to wait."

With sharp concern, Webster followed the big man into the living-room. He had known this man from the start of his career — Big Tom Flarigan, the political driver of the controlling machine. Flarigan's organization dominated the city. To oppose him meant political suicide—an axiom proven repeatedly at the polls. Webster, looking in Flarigan's dark blue eyes, saw condemnation now.

"Webster, I made you—you're not forgetting that, are you?"

"You put me in office, Flarigan—that's true."

"Sure." There was an ominous undertone of warning in the big man's fatherly manner. "The D.A. we had then was raising a bad smell. You were just the kind of a man we needed. We worked together pretty well then, didn't we, Webster? I got you elected."

"You made me," Webster said with eyes gleaming, "and you can break me—that's the point, isn't it, Flarigan?"

Webster's directness brought a conciliating gesture from the big man. "No need to put it that way, but it's true. You're a good man, Webster, but a little—impulsive. Sometimes you don't stop to think. You're going like all hell fire into something now that ought to be handled careful."

"Natto?" Webster asked tightly.

Now Flarigan's fatherly manner vanished. "Be wise, Webster. Be smart. Why, if you play along with me, you can have anything you want.

The voters like you. Anything you want—mayor, senator, maybe even governor in time—anything. If you play along with me, Webster—and be wise."

"That kind of wisdom, Flarigan," Webster answered, "doesn't seem to be a characteristic inherited with my red hair."

Flarigan came heavily to his feet. "Better think it over, Webster. Think it over. You said it—I made you and I can break you. Remember that."

Webster said tightly: "Listen. I won't be bribed with money and I won't be bribed with threats. Becoming mayor or senator or even governor doesn't mean a damn thing to me. I'm where I want to be—district attorney—with a chance to make the lay mean what it should. If you're determined to break me, Flarigan, you can start now."

Flarigan warned again: "Be wise."

"I'm going after Natto and Brock until I get them. That's a promise, Flarigan. Good-night!"

FLARIGAN strode out. Webster's flaming temper brought wrathful red to his face as he closed the entrance with a click. He turned swiftly, sped to the rear door, sidled into the gloom. The political boss' threats passed from his mind in his concern for Brown, in the danger of Brock's presence in his house. He drifted silently across the grass until a whisper stopped him:

"Skipper!" Brown came quickly to Webster's side. "He's still in there, skipper—my place!"

Webster said tightly: "We'll pay him a call."

They moved toward the door in the wall of the garage which opened onto stairs that could be raised and lowered from the ceiling. Through it Brown had seen Nat Brock slip. Now, as they neared it, they heard the soft rasp of a turning knob, and saw a dark figure silhouetted against the white wall.

"Get him!" Webster snapped.

The command sent Brown diving toward the door, and Brock bounding toward the alley. Webster heard the cracking of knuckles against flesh as he leaped to block Brock's path. He saw Brown staggering against the wall, Brock again leaping off. Webster bounded, Webley in hand, straight at Brock. A driving fist smashed along Webster's chin as he straight-armed with his left.

The skin of his knuckles split on the joint of Brock's jaw. Brock sprawled back, arms flinging wildly, and crunched on the gravel walk. Brown, scrambling, plunged on him. Webster straddled, automatic leveled, his temper a raging heat. Brown dragged the struggling man up and Webster's voice crackled.

"Stop that!" Brock peered, and the glint of the Webley forced him to subside. His breath beat fast as he peered into Brown's face, then into Webster's.

Webster commanded evenly: "Go back up, Brock. You're just the man I want to see. If I'm not mistaken, there's an odor of naphthalene about you."

Brock gasped: "I know him! He's Brown! Brown!"

Brown's big hands grabbed at Brock's shoulders and he shook him viciously. "Shut up!" he ordered. "You heard that. Go back up!"

Webster's heart sped as Brown hurled Brock against the garage wall. The glimmer of the Webley forced Brock through the door, back up the stairs. Brown kept close behind him; Webster stepped last into the little room under the roof. Brock whirled to face them, his ratty eyes flashing with fear and triumph.

"Turning Brown in, Webster?" he asked in a snarl. "Tellin' the cops there's an escaped convict here?"

Brown snapped: "Shut up, rat!"

Brock blurted: "He's been livin' here—I've found that out! Livin' here on the D.A.'s place! That's goin' to

be good! The D.A. harborin' a fugitive!"

Brown snapped again, savagely: "Shut up!"

"I'll spread it! The D.A. with a convict in his place! How'll you like that, Webster? How'll you like goin' up the river for it? You're goin' to get the works for it—the—"

Ted Brown's hand slapped resoundingly across Brock's evil mouth. Brock staggered, dazed, terror shining in his eyes. Brown took dogged steps after him, fists clenched.

"You framed me, Brock—that's the reason I'm a convict. You drilled Cling and fixed it on me! I've been waiting for a chance to get my hands on you! Brock, you dirty—!"

Brown's fingers closed on Brock's throat. Brock's face flashed white as he clawed at the ex-cop's tendonized wrists. Cold fury tightened Brown's muscles as Webster seized his arm.

"Easy, Teddy!"

Brown looked up, lips drawn, thumbs crushing upon Brock's windpipe.

"If you kill him, Teddy," Webster said slowly, "you'll never have a chance to clear yourself of the charge of murder."

Brown's hands loosened. He stepped back and left Brock cringing against the wall. He began: "Him finding out about you and me, skipper—"

Brock cut in vehemently: "You'll have to kill me to keep it quiet! Murder! That's the only way you can keep me from tellin' the whole—"

Again Brown's hard hand slapped stinging pain across Brock's mouth. Brock sagged, lips bleeding. Webster, looking into Brown's anxious eyes, said quietly:

"Tie him up, Teddy. Make a good job of it."

Brock pushed for the wall, began a mad scramble toward the door. Webster sprang after him desperately; his arm hooked under Brock's chin and Brock squirmed helplessly.

Brown, jerking a sheet from the bed, began tearing it into strips. Webster grimly held his man captive until Brown gasped, "Okay, skipper!" Then Webster twisted Brock's arms, forced him down, held him still while Brown wrapped white bands tightly around Brock's ankles and wrists.

Brown thrust a section of the sheet into Brock's mouth and bound it down with another strip. When he rose, Brock lay helpless on the floor, terrified eyes staring.

Webster's hands went into his pocket. He said, "This belongs to you, I think, Brock." A tiny sphere of white, clicking and rolling on the floor, brought wilder terror to Brock's eyes. Webster stood straight, gun returned to his holster, speaking tartly.

"You're going to have a chance to make up your mind, Brock—to tell the truth. Brown's going to stay right here, and wait for you to talk. The whole story, Brock—how you poisoned Judge Crawford, how you robbed my office, how Natto put a killer on my trail. How you framed Brown for murder—all of it. A statement, signed and witnessed, that will stand as evidence in court. When you're ready, Brock, just let Brown know."

Webster strode stiffly down the stairs. Brown followed him, and in the darkness beside the garage they paused, peering at each other haggardly.

"Gee, skipper, I'll kill that rat before I'll let him get you into trouble—about me!"

"If you do that, Teddy," Webster answered levelly, "there'll never be an hour when the law won't be hunting for you as a convicted murderer."

"I'll go to the chair before I'll see you take a rap on my account!"

Webster's tight lips clipped his words. "You can't do that, Teddy, you can't! This is my job—my job, do you understand that? Even if it breaks me, I'm going to get Natto and Brock. That's a promise, Teddy—a promise I'm going to keep!"

CHAPTER IV COFFIN LOOT

LIGHTS were burning in Webster's office next evening when he strode in quietly. Mae Gary, alert and bright-eyed as though she had not lost a moment's sleep, followed him to his desk. There was anxiety in her eyes, a sadness in her smile that pinched Webster's heart. She asked quietly:

"Now—can you tell me why?"

"Mae, it's something I can never tell you."

Her chin lifted. "Some day I'm going to find out, Jack, and make you see it doesn't matter—that nothing can matter that much."

"I hope you never find out."

"I'm going to try." She forced another smile. "In the meantime, then, between the district attorney and his secretary, strictly business. I've just tried again, on the telephone, to get Mattison to let down about the autopsy, but he won't. He's blocked every move."

Webster's knuckles rapped the desk angrily. He reached for the telephone, spun off the number in Brown's hidden room. "Hat and coat, Mae," he said quietly. "I'm going to need you." He heard the receiver lift, but no salutation answered.

"District Attorney Webster speaking. Anything doing on the case you're handling?"

Brown's answer rang with anger. "Brock's holding out, skipper. He ain't made a move to talk yet. Gee, it's hard to keep my hands off that dirty rat's throat!"

Webster answered: "I'll handle that. Coming right away."

He left his desk with determined steps, and Mae Gary, in trim coat and pert hat, followed him down the stairway. As he went with her to his car, he felt again the prickling warning that he was being watched. To Webster it meant that a hired killer was still trailing him, that the moment was coming when a well-aimed bullet

would hit him. He glanced around alertly as he took the wheel and started away.

The girl beside him said nothing as he took the shortest route toward the home of Judge Crawford. He drew to the curb, noting that a patrolman was stationed on the porch. "Mattison," he observed wryly, "expects me to do something hot-headed!"

Mae's eyes followed him anxiously.

"Wait," he said. He went quietly across the sidewalk, alertly watching the patrolman, and eased through the gate. Still feeling that eerie warning of hidden eyes watching him, he kept to the shadows and walked across the grass. Circling silently to the side of the house, he peered through a curtained window and saw a familiar face—a man talking with Mrs. Crawford. Mattison.

Cold purpose narrowing his eyes, Webster shifted to the side porch, to the French windows of the adjoining room. He peered in through drawn drapes, and saw, in the amber light, a casket.

Webster pried at the windows, drew one open silently. He stepped quietly into the room where the dead jurist lay; he went to the casket and peered down at the waxlike features of Judge Crawford. His lips pressed as he brought a small pair of scissors from his pocket. He bent intently, and the blades snipped off a lock of the dead man's hair.

He slipped it into an envelope, which he pocketed — turned — and stopped short, staring. He had not heard the connecting door open. He had heard no step in the room. But now he was looking into the ominous eyes of Inspector Mattison—black condemnation.

Mattison drawled bitterly: "That's going too far, Webster."

Webster's answer snapped. "You forced it on me, by refusing—"

"I warned you about making a mistake. Mutilating a dead body is a serious crime. Where do you think it's going to get you?"

Grimly Webster countered with: "What are you going to do about it, Mattison?"

"We'll ask the commissioner," Mattison said heavily. "We'll ask him what we're going to do about it. Give me that, Webster." The inspector's hand extended for the envelope.

Webster straightened. "I'm keeping it, Mattison—and I'll answer to any charge for taking it. There's one procedure you forget, isn't there? You'll have to have a warrant before you can arrest me." He started angrily toward the open door.

"I think I'll have it, Webster."

Webster stepped out into the darkness—and into the menace of a killer's gun.

The whizz of the bullet past Webster's head was followed quickly by the muffled report that burst from the shadows of the lawn. Glass cracked behind Webster's head as he leaped aside, hand sliding toward his Webley.

Mattison blurted in consternation and charged into the open.

Webster, backing against the wall, warned swiftly: "Out of the light, inspector!"

Mattison bawled: "Adams!" and the patrolman came running from the front porch.

A rustle of leaves on the far side of the lawn told Webster that the sniper was rushing for cover. Grimly, deciding to leave the chase to Mattison, he started across the lawn toward the gate. Adams was running with bared gun. Mattison plodded wheezing and grim after Adams as Webster hurried to his car.

He remarked wryly as he slipped behind the wheel, Mae Gary's widened eyes upon him: "Natto's rod man is a rotten shot!"

The girl's hand went to his hotly as he sent the car swinging around the bend in the drive. He headed into the business district, swung to a stop in front of a telegraph office. He wrote on a blank quickly:

TSD

DR. NORTON:

Please analyze this sample of hair for traces of arsenic and give your report to Inspector Mattison as soon as possible.

WEBSTER.

The note was sealed in the envelope with the white lock when Webster pressed it with a bill in the hand of a messenger boy. "Hang onto that," he ordered, "and break all records getting there!" His face was set, his eyes shining with purpose, when he returned to the wheel and sent the car whizzing again.

MAE GARY'S eyes reflected bewilderment when he swung into the alleyway behind his home. She followed him as he opened the garage door. He lowered the steps, went up and into the lighted room, followed by the girl who paused in consternation, peering at Brock, bound on the floor, and at the ruddy face of Ted Brown.

"You've seen Ted Brown before, Mae," Webster said with quiet grimness. "You know now that the district attorney is guilty of harboring a fugitive."

The girl asked breathlessly, "Is that—is that the reason why you can't—"

"No," Webster said softly. "No, Mae. It's — something else." He turned to the bound Brock while the girl watched anxiously. His lips tightened when Brown blurted: "He's kept tight as a clam, skipper!" His hands fastened on Brock's arms as he said:

"You might get me for this, Brock—but that's not going to stop my getting you. Understand that? Listen. Brown's going with me. My secretary is staying here with you, ready to take any statement you want to make. This is your last chance tonight—understand?"

Brock glared. Webster straightened to say: "Get into that old uniform of yours, Teddy. Mae, I'm forced to mix you up in this. Tonight's got to decide Natto's case—there's no other way. If Brock wants to make a statement, take

his gag off—don't loosen his hands or feet—and make him sign your notes. Will you do it, Mae?"

Mae Gary answered firmly: "I'll do anything you ask of me, Jack."

Ted Brown was quickly pulling into the blue uniform of a patrolman. Webster's mind flashed details of a plan while he waited. Before going to his office, he had been watching the building in which Ray Natto lived. He had seen Natto leave, and had followed to another building. There, Webster knew, lived one Helen Norcross, a blond dancer at the Paradise Cabaret, upon whom Natto lavished furs and diamonds. He gambled that Natto was still there, and took up the telephone to dial the number of the Norcross apartment.

The woman's voice that answered was falsely cultured.

Webster, speaking in a whisper, asked: "Ray there?"

"Yes."

"Tell him he's wanted at home."

Brock stared at Webster with terror, Mae Gary with growing anxiety, as Webster spun the dial again. This time he ticked off the number of the apartment building in which Ray Natto lived. In a voice cleverly disguised, Webster asked for Natto.

"What?" came over the line. "You're kidding me, aren't you? I know your voice—you're Mr. Natto yourself."

Webster said: "No, no. You're mistaken."

The doubtful answer was: "You sound just like Mr. Natto. Either way, he isn't in."

"Take a message," Webster directed in the counterfeit of the extortionist's voice. "Come to 1010 Wharton Street. One of the boys is in trouble. That's all, thanks."

"You sure this isn't a joke, you're not Mr. Natto?"

Webster cut the connection, smiling tightly. Brown was buttoning the tunic of his uniform. The girl took the gun which Webster pressed into her hand and smiled when he said:

"Chin up!" His fingers lingered on hers as Brown ran down the steps; and when he turned to follow, his denied yearning for this girl was an agony.

Brown sat tensely beside Webster as he sped the car toward the business section of the city.

"Skipper, I can't figure this!" he blurted.

Webster smiled tightly, and turned the car into a street colored with the neon glare of cheap restaurants and shady hotels. "I'm playing a gamble to force the truth out of Natto's hired men, Teddy," he said quickly. "And if that gamble loses, there'll be no more of either of us."

"Skipper, I can take it," Brown answered earnestly. "But I'm not going to see you get it on my account!"

Webster's car stopped near the corner of Wharton Street. He walked with Brown quickly to the door of 1010. It was an empty store, its panes grimy. Webster's skeleton keys drew the bolt of the old lock. He eased in; Brown stood at his side in the darkness. Quietly he said:

"We'll see if Natto takes the bait. Watch for him through the window, Teddy—in that checkered coat and flashy green hat of his. Remember above everything else—we can't let Natto catch even a glimpse of us. If he does, the whole plan's wrecked."

"He won't be able to see much through our knuckles, skipper!"

THEY waited while minutes ticked by with agonizing slowness. Each time a shadow passed the grimy windows, they tightened. Each time a step sounded on the pavement their breath quickened. Dread that the wary Natto would not come made their hearts beat heavily while minute followed minute interminably. Webster's bitter despair ended abruptly with Brown's sharp whisper:

"Back, skipper!"

They huddled against the side wall, peering at the shadows which now lay motionless on the greasy panes. Shoes

gritted down the cement stairs. Webster poised, seeing the evil face of Ray Natto in the faint neon glow. He saw Natto make a gesture that might be a signal to some one else in the street. The knob grated and turned; and Natto took slow steps inward.

Webster leaped. His shoulder jarred the heavy-muscled man against the opposite wall. Natto whirled with a stifled bellow and struck once, wildly. Webster's fists flashed with trained precision, three times, driving past Natto's clumsy defense. The paunchy man went down with a wheeze, crunched to the floor, lay still.

"He didn't spot us, skipper! All clear!"

"Watch the door, Teddy!"

Brown stood alert, hand ready on the butt of his gun, while Webster bent breathlessly over Natto. He found Natto's keys; he emptied every pocket. He pulled off Natto's top-coat and hat, then took a roll of adhesive tape from his pocket. He plastered Natto's mouth, bound Natto's wrists and ankles with the sticky straps. He straightened at Brown's side, peered into the pink-green glare of the street and said tightly:

"You're coming with me, Teddy."

Webster eased the door open. He took Natto's coat and hat, went up the steps, glanced back and forth, started away. Shock stopped him—an explosion of cold sensations. It struck his senses like a sudden storm—the pinch of torn flesh, the hollow pop of a silenced report, the snarl of clashing gears. Stunned, Webster spilled down, feeling warm blood trickle, as a lightless car flashed past.

"Skipper!"

Brown's hands fastened hard, dragged Webster back into the room and jerked him half upright. Breath beating, Webster stooped, torn muscles refusing to allow him to stand. Hot blood was coursing down his side, and the sting of sharp pain was beginning to pulse through his body. He braced himself, and blurted:

"Natto's rod man—is getting better with that gun, Teddy!"

Brown was crouching at the door, police positive gripped, staring out. The rushing car had whirled around the corner and out of sight. He turned back in an agony of anxiety as Webster forced himself to stand erect. Webster's hand, pressed hard to his side, was streaked with red.

"Skipper, he got you! We can't go through with it!"

Webster took a deep, cold breath. "Go through with it? Nothing's stopping me tonight, Teddy."

Webster painfully bundled Natto's top-coat and hat; he went up the steps with Brown anxiously following. His body throbbed with growing pain as he slipped into his car. Brown watched him in consternation as he pressed the motor hard.

Webster brought the car to a stop in the alley behind the apartment building in which Natto lived. He stepped out, unrolling the coat, shaping the hat. As Brown watched, he assumed the appearance of Ray Natto in the dim light from the windows. He took a folded newspaper from the car and directed Brown tightly:

"Come up a few seconds after me, Teddy."

"Sure, skipper!"

As he approached the entrance of the apartment house, he lowered his head, pretended to read the newspaper, imitated Natto's slouching walk. As he passed, the door man said: "Good evening, Mr. Natto." In the elevator, the attendant remarked: "Nice evening, Mr. Natto." Webster kept his face turned away, answered: "Fine evening" in Natto's voice, and stepped to the door of Natto's apartment.

Natto's keys admitted him. He walked slowly through silent rooms into that which Natto used as an office. He turned back as a rattle sounded; Ted Brown came in quietly. Webster took off the coat and hat; he opened a drawer of the desk, though he scarcely hoped to find incriminating

evidence in it; and his examination was stopped by the ring of the telephone.

Webster lifted the instrument.

The voice that came over the line was breathy, hushed. "Perles calling, Ray."

"Well?" Webster asked, in Natto's voice.

"I got the D.A.! I trailed him into a store on Wharton Street and put a bullet in him when he was coming out."

Grimly Webster answered: "Good work, Slick."

"I'm getting rid of the rod, then I'm clearing out of town. But first I need some coin, Ray. How about sending me over a roll? I'm at the Sunrise."

Wryly Webster answered, again in Natto's voice: "Stay there, Slick. I'm sending something over."

"Thanks, Ray. The D.A.'s not pinning anything on us or anybody else now!"

WEBSTER lowered the instrument with a tight smile, Swift decision again moved his hand toward it at once. Just as his fingertips touched, the bell shrilled with the signal of another incoming call. Webster tensed, and lifted the receiver. Immediately, before he could speak, a husky voice blurted:

"Brock talkin'—Brock!"

Brock! Webster had left him bound, in Brown's secret room with Mae Gary. He had been hoping until this instant that fear would force Brock to talk. A bewilderment of consternation struck him and pain stabbed in his wound as he gripped the telephone. His mind sped to meet the surprise. Simulating Natto's voice, he asked: "Where you been?"

"No time to tell you now, Ray! We've got the D.A.—that's what I'm callin' to say! Got him cold! I'm comin' straight over, but I got to tell you now—Mattison's on his way to your place—Mattison!"

With difficulty, in his cold dismay, Webster maintained the disguise of his

voice. "What's Mattison coming here for?"

"I'm tellin' you we've got the D.A. Brown—wanted for murder—the D.A.'s been hidin' him! Brown's been hidin' on Webster's place. That's why Mattison's comin' to your place, Ray—to hear what I've got to tell him about Webster!"

All the lingering fear of years of a lived lie stung Webster's heart at that moment. He felt the despair of the damned as he gripped the instrument and sat in silent torture. He managed to mutter into the transmitter:

"How much did you tell Mattison, Nat?"

"I didn't tell him anything—except that I've somethin' on the D.A. Just enough to get him hot-footin' it over to your place. When I get through talkin' with Mattison, Webster'll be startin' up the river! I'm comin' now!"

Webster sat chilled as the connection broke. Instantly he rattled the hook, demanded the number of the telephone in Brown's hidden haven. He waited an agonized minute until an answer came in Mae Gary's breathless voice.

"Mae! What happened?"

"Jack! He managed to get his hands loose, and I didn't know it. He knocked me down, and got out of here. I—I didn't know what to do, Jack. I followed him, saw him go into a store and a telephone booth. I managed to get into the next one and I heard him calling Mattison—"

"Did he tell Mattison about Teddy?"

"No—nothing definite. Oh, Jack, darling—"

"Mae! Are you hurt?"

"I'm all right," the girl answered with a sob. "Jack, what can you do—now?"

"Listen!" he urged sibilantly. "Call headquarters as soon as I hang up. You've been tipped off by someone who called my office—you know Slick Perles is at the Sunrise Bar now, with

the gun he's been sniping at me with. Perles is waiting there. Got that?"

"Yes, Jack!"

"Good girl!" He broke the connection. Then immediately, using the voice of Natto, he asked for the number of police headquarters. His voice was his own when he asked for the office of Inspector Mattison. The answer sent a new chill through him:

"Inspector Mattison has just left the building."

It meant: "Mattison is on his way now to Natto's apartment."

Webster pushed away the instrument, which had sounded a pronouncement of doom on him.

CHAPTER V

THE D. A.'S WAY

WEBSTER rose alertly, his mind in turmoil. His nerves tightened as he heard an elevator panel click, and steps come toward the door. His signal sent Brown back through a connecting door. He waited, hand on knob, until a rap sounded. He asked again, in disguised tones, "Who is it?" and heard:

"Brock."

Webster pulled the door open. Brock started in and stopped. The click of the closing door turned him. He stared at Webster, and at the door in which Ted Brown appeared. He took retreating steps, his face ashy with dismay; and then his thin lips began to curl in triumph.

"Mattison's coming," he said. "That's your finish, Webster."

Webster answered, eyes levelled: "I think you're right, Brock. My finish and yours. Natto's opened up. He's told his story. All of it—the whole rotten mess—it's all in the record, signed and witnessed. He's going down to headquarters now."

Brock rasped: "That's a lie."

"Have it your way," Webster answered easily. "But when Mattison leaves here, he'll be taking you along with me. You'll be starting on the

last mile, Brock. They're polishing up the chair for you now."

Brock snarled again: "That's a lie."

"Mattison's coming," Webster reminded him. "You're staying until Mattison comes, and then you'll know it's the truth. There's only one way to escape the chair, Brock. You can save yourself by telling the whole truth about all of Natto's deals. How about it, Brock?"

Brock's answer was a darting snatch at his arm-pit holstered gun. It flashed in the light as Webster's hand swung toward his Webley. The pain of his wound had stiffened Webster's muscles. His gun was still inside his coat when Brock's glinted level. He leaped to avoid the blast even as the report thundered.

Brock whirled away, firing again—and Webster felt the sting of it gashing his shoulder as he fell aside. At the same instant another gun roared in the room—the police positive in the hand of Ted Brown. A gun exactly like it, his fingerprints marking it, had condemned Ted Brown for murder. Now it dealt leaden vengeance on Brock—a withering fusillade of bullets crashed Brock lifeless to the floor.

"Teddy!"

Jack Webster, crouched with pain, stared aghast at the limp figure on the carpet, at the trickling red on Brock's clothes. Ted Brown was standing with smoking gun in hand—and smiling. Webster's face was white with dismay—and Brown was smiling.

"That's a promise kept," the ex-cop said.

"Teddy—you can never clear yourself now!"

"What I'm thinking of, skipper, is that Brock won't do any talking now—about you hiding me."

Webster listened in tortured anxiety. The explosions in the room had aroused an alarm across the hall. There were startled voices in the adjoining suite. Webster jerked open the entrance, and peered out—but the corridor was empty. He snapped over his shoulder.

"Get out of here, Teddy! Down the fire-stairs—fast!"

"Not without you, skipper!"

"Get down!"

Webster's tone was an imperative command. He thrust Brown out the door. He stood, muscles tight, heart hammering, as the ex-cop sped around the bend, to the entrance of the fire-stairs. He held back, a thought blazing in his mind. Instantly it became a desperate plan of action.

"Eye-witnesses!"

Webster sprang across the room to the chair on which he had placed Natto's checkered coat and green hat. He tugged into them quickly. He strode to the door, listened. Now the voices were subsiding; the alarm was passing. Deliberately Jack Webster raised his Webley. He opened the door, so that the reports might ring more loudly in the corridor, and, four times, swiftly, pulled the trigger.

The blasting concussions stirred a new response. A woman screamed; a man called out. A knob rattled, and a door opened. Shielding his face with low-pulled hat and hunched shoulders, Webster began a quick, breathless run along the corridor. He heard the clack of an elevator grille, glanced back swiftly and saw, stepping out of an elevator cab—Inspector Mattison.

Webster fired back as he fled past the L of the hall. His slug whined off the tile as Mattison dragged at a hip-holstered service gat. Webster whirled into the fire-stairs, bounded down them. The baffling echoes of his own footfalls in the well made it impossible for him to determine if Mattison was following. He sprang from platform to platform; darting across a cellar room, he sped through a door held wide by Brown. Together they ran toward the waiting car.

WEBSTER sent it flying. He swung it into the street, turned four times in a bewildering succession. While Brown steadied the wheel, he wriggled out of the checkered top-

coat, snatched off the hat. He touched the switch of the radio and kept the car rolling rapidly while Brown sat breathlessly.

"Calling all cars!" The radio twanged. "Calling all cars. Pick up Ray Natto. Use caution; he may resist. Calling all cars to pick up Ray Natto, last seen escaping his apartment on Plaza Street and Fifth. Code thirteen. Code thirteen."

Code thirteen, in the lexicon of the police radio system, meant, "Wanted for murder."

Brown swung the car sharply to the curb a block from the store at 1010

They groped through black rooms to a back entrance. They darted across a bleak yard, swung over a board fence. Once in the car, Webster drove with a slowness that was torture in his anxiety. He kept listening to repeated radio alarms for Ray Natto. When he turned into his garage, he saw a shadow moving in the light on the stairs, and rushed up.

Mae Gary went into his arms and sobbed. In dismay the girl examined Webster's wounds; she forced him to submit while she dressed them. It was not until they were cleaned and bound that the dance music on the radio



Wharton Street. Brown hurried with him along the dark alley while he grimaced with pain, carrying Natto's coat and hat bundled against his throbbing side. They darted to the entrance of the empty store and shouldered in. Together they bent over Natto.

Natto was squirming in the dark, squealing behind his gag of adhesive tape. Webster ripped off, pinioned him, stripped the bands from his ankles and wrists. As Natto struck out, Webster's fist drove him flat against the wall, Brown whirled with Webster toward the rear of the store. Behind them Natto's coat and hat lay on the littered floor.

ceased playing and an announcer's voice followed the clang of a bell.

"A special news dispatch, ladies and gentlemen. Ray Natto has just been picked up by the police. He was found by squad car men and is now being taken to headquarters for questioning by Inspector Mattison, who saw him escaping the scene of a murder.

"A second flash, ladies and gentlemen. 'Slick' Perles, underworld henchman of Natto, is dead as the result of a gun-fight with police who closed in on him at the Sunrise Bar a few moments ago. A charge of attempted murder of Jack Webster, district attorney, was about to be lodged against

him. Perles' attempt to escape cost him his life. A silenced gun was found on him which police expect to prove is the weapon he used in his attempts to murder Webster. A bullet embedded in the door of the office of the district attorney will establish—"

"Jack!" Mae Gary exclaimed as Brown snapped the radio off and grinned in cold satisfaction. "What have you done?"

Jack Webster answered: "Cracked a case!" He peered at Brown as he spun the dial of the telephone. "I've overlooked something in the rush, Teddy. Thanks for my life. But—you'll never be able to get clear now."

"That's okay with me, skipper," Brown said, still grinning. "Okay, because you're clear!"

Webster's request brought the voice of Inspector Mattison on the wire.

"Webster! You listen! I've got Natto here on a warrant for murder. Dr. Norton just phoned to say his analysis shows arsenic present in the judge's hair. How the devil do you know things like that—that arsenic can be detected in the hair? You've had it from the start—Nat Brock poisoned that old man. Considering that, Webster, forget what I said at Crawford's house, will you?"

"Gladly," Webster quietly answered. "As for Brock, he'll never squeal on Natto now. That's probably the reason Natto got him, wasn't it, inspector? And the reason Brock is now roasting in hell—probably wishing for a cold glass of ale!"

JACK WEBSTER moved agitatedly back and forth across his office. The atmosphere of the court-house was bustling, tense, expectant. Downstairs, a jury was deliberating behind a locked door on the most vital case Jack Webster had ever handled. He paused at his desk to gaze again at the headlines of the special editions which had roared off the presses since the jury had retired.

"NATTO VERDICT EXPECTED TONIGHT!" the black banner read.

Webster's eyes skipped to paragraphs which gave him cold satisfaction.

In his charge to the jury, Judge Joseph Cheever said:

"The counsel for the defense has advanced the alibi that at the time of the murder of Nathan Brock, the defendant Raymond Natto, was being held by kidnapers. You are to examine the statements of the telephone operator at the defendant's home that it was the defendant's voice which telephoned that night, asking for himself—which, according to the state, was an attempt to establish an alibi for premeditated homicide.

"Defendant's statements concerning this alleged kidnapping are unsupported. No one saw the act committed as he states. He cannot name or identify the kidnapers. These statements you must consider against the testimony of six persons who said they saw Natto flee his apartment at the time of the murder, a smoking gun in his hand. One of these witnesses was Inspector Mattison.

"You must decide, gentlemen of the jury, whether defendant's alibi can stand against the testimony of these eye witnesses."

Webster looked up to see Mae Gary quickly entering, her color high, her eyes shining.

"The jury's reporting!" she exclaimed. "And you have a caller—Mr. Flarigan."

Webster's eyes lingered on her face as he stepped out to confront Flarigan.

Flarigan was blinking, looking solemn. He said slowly: "Webster, you went ahead in spite of my—suggestion. It happens that you're coming through okay but—that's dangerous. Be wise. Get the idea? Be wise and be mayor or governor if you choose. Get the idea?"

"You made me, Flarigan," Webster answered with a wry smile, "and you can break me. I won't be surprised if you find occasion again to remind me of that!"

He felt Flarigan glowering after him threateningly as he ran down the stairs. He entered a courtroom hushed and tense. He saw the jury already in the box, the dignified Judge Cheever eyeing the foreman. The court's question came:

"Gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?"

"We have."

"What is your verdict?"

"Guilty."

The hush deepened; Judge Cheever's rumble was the voice of doom:

"This court pronounces upon the defendant, Raymond Natto, the sentence of electrocution to be executed upon him during the week of October 12th. Court is adjourned."

Bedlam! Reporters sped from the doors. Spectators sprang from their seats, chattering, crowding. Within the rail the District Attorney of King's County triumphantly faced the towering, scowling Herbert Knox. He said with quiet firmness:

"You'll appeal, of course, but you can't win. Eyewitnesses, Knox. They're powerful, you know—especially when one of them is a man like Mattison. Powerful enough to make it a certainty that Natto's going to the chair."

Knox's vulture eyes gleamed defiance. Natto was sagging at the defense counsel table, mumbling bewildered protests. Flarigan was near, peering at Webster, wagging his head forbiddingly. At the rail Mae Gary was standing, her shining gaze on Webster. And at the gate, Inspector

Mattison had paused.

A plainclothes man had come hurrying into the courtroom. He proffered an envelope to Mattison. Mattison glimpsed its return address—*Department of Justice, Washington, D. C.*—as he snatched it and ripped it open. He peered intently at neat, terse lines:

The fingerprints submitted by you do not match any in our files. Pennsylvania, which you mention as the suspect's home, was slow to cooperate with this department in submitting fingerprints. Philadelphia did not begin sending them, for instance, until 1929.

Defeat sagged Mattison's shoulders. He glanced at the district attorney with a faint smile that said: "Guess I'm a meddling fool."

Thomas Neill, convicted murderer, alias Jack Webster, district attorney, looked into Mattison's eyes—and smiled.

Then Webster led Mae Gary from the courtroom. He whispered: "To-night at dinner I'll tell you the whole story."

Mae Gary said: "I don't care what it is, Jack. Nothing can change my mind—nothing. I love you."

A warm, happy smile spread over Jack Webster's face. He squeezed Mae's arm. Together, they left the court-house and walked into the bright, cheery sunshine.

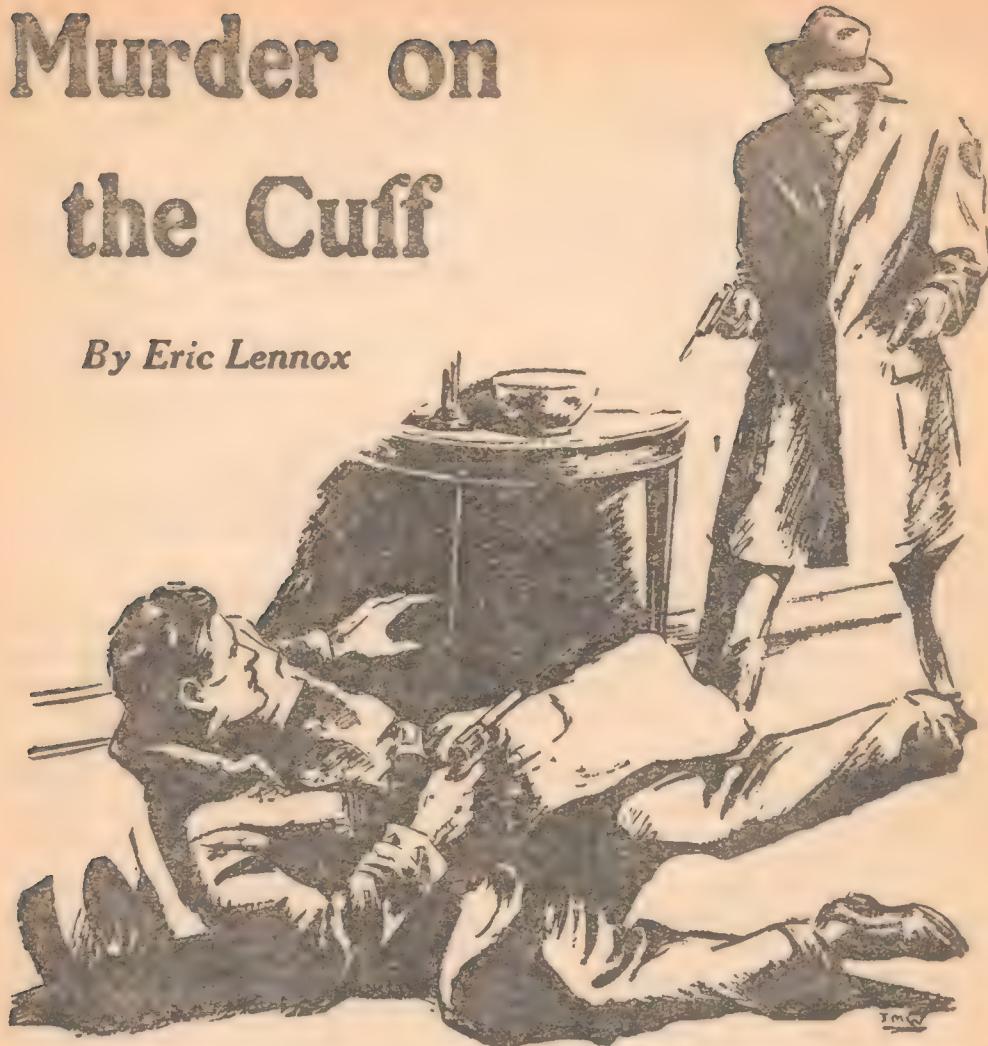


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Murder on the Cuff

By Eric Lennox



He was a sensational columnist—tops in his line. But he had to turn detective for ten seconds. For he was unmasking a murderer in his column.



Lee Ainsley legged his way a bit uncertainly over to the sloppy bar. Little puddles of water covered its surface and made the red mahogany-stain shine and reflect the lights of the back bar.

"Sloppiest bar in town," Lee told himself as he hunted for a dry spot on

which his elbow might be allowed to rest so as to steady his slightly weaving body. Finally he found it, let his elbow and forearm rest on the bar and looked down its gleaming surface for the barkeep, Charlie Meeks.

"Hey, Charlie," he called, "a half-and-half and don't snooze over it. In other words, I crave service. My head's muggy, my throat's dry and I'm broke as the Common Peepul. In

words of one syllable, dearie, this drink's on the house."

Charlie sniffed but reached for the proper containers and the correct ingredients. He threw the cocktail together with pre-war dexterity, placed the glass on the wet mahogany bar and slid it a good ten feet until it stopped directly in line with Lee's elbow.

"What I calls accuracy," said Lee and sipped of the drink gratefully. He added, "And potency." He smacked his lips.

"You shouldn't ought to come here, Lee," chided Charlie seriously, eyes wrinkled with worry lines. "You'd oughta know that Greasy Nordile has got the Indian sign out on you. He said only yesterday that it was curtains for you when he got you. You'd oughta know that Greasy is—"

"Aw, a Bronx cheer for the punk," said Lee carelessly. He downed the last sip of his half-and-half and then his lips made a sound, an expert rendition of the Bronx razz.

"But you'd oughta—" began Charlie ominously.

Lee shoved himself back from the bar, surveyed Charlie through critical eyes.

He said, "Charlie, when the hell are you going to quit murdering the New Deal's English? You ain't never going to learn nothing anyway. You oughta be smart like I am, Charlie. Course I haven't any money, but I got something just as good. 'What,' I can hear you say, 'does the little man mean by that?' Well, Charlie, I'll tell you. I have no money, but I do have something worth money. A real diamond pin, my boy, a *real* diamond."

Charlie sighed as Lee's fingers sought his tie and came away with a stickpin of filigreed white gold in which reposed a single diamond of modest size. Lee laid the pin before him on the wet bar.

"Even a pawnbroker'll let me have a ten spot on it, Charlie. You let me have a sawbuck and I'll buy some drinks. Come pay day, I'll return and

take it up and you'll have done your good deed for the week, boy scout. Do we trade?"

Charlie sighed again. "Aw, take a couple drinks and pay me when you get the jack," he suggested.

The diamond pin was Lee's last resort for a drink. Charlie had it half the time, when it wasn't in the till of some café, and knew there was no way of refusing to lend the newspaper man the money. He reached for the pin.

Suddenly he stopped the movement of his arm, and Lee looked up into Charlie's face. What he saw made him stiffen and his eyes went over Charlie's shoulder to the mirror of the back bar.

In the back bar mirror was framed the entrance door thirty feet away. It had been pushed wide and a man stood in the space, two others behind him.

It was Greasy Nordile!

"I tol' you, kid, I tol' you!" hissed Charlie and casually began wiping his way down the bar, working steadily away from Lee.

A small clock, inset in the wood of the back bar, showed two-thirty in the morning. Greasy Nordile, framed in the mirror, stood talking to his men. Lee could see his lips move even at that distance.

Lee said, voice steady, "A whiskey straight, Charlie. Make it snappy. It may be the last one I'll ever have."

Lee's fingers reached forward a bit and curled around the diamond stickpin where Charlie had dropped it upon the entrance of Greasy Nordile and his men.

GREASY'S men were walking around the place. Greasy eyed them expectantly. They prowled through the washrooms, stockrooms and the kitchen. They nodded to Greasy. Charlie and Lee were alone. Greasy smiled malevolently.

Charlie slid a whiskey glass brimming with Canadian Club to Lee and then poured a nip for himself.

Charlie sidled away again, clinked bottles together on the back bar in an assiduous effort to appear occupied.

There was a tight grin on Lee's face as he jabbed the diamond pin slantingly into the mahogany bar top. He sipped his whiskey until there was a rustle at his side. He turned slowly, saw Greasy Nordile, backed by the two men, up close. Something pressed gently into his side.

"I've been looking for you," said Greasy nastily.

"Yeah, and what of it, punk?" asked Lee quietly, his eyes slits of baleful fire.

The other's eyes became vengeful pools of narrowed flame at the words.

His arms were folded loosely across his chest and Lee could see the slight bulge under the left arm which told of the easily reached gat. Lee was very quiet and the half full whiskey glass in his hand was as steady as the eyes which arrowed into those of Greasy Nordile.

"Guess you'd better come with me," said Greasy. Then he added, "As a newspaper man, you're about ripe for picking."

Greasy's head jerked signals to the men behind him. They came forward, one on either side of Lee.

"You put too many cute things in that trick column of yours," suggested Greasy.

"I get paid for that," said Lee and held the whiskey glass to his lips.

"Yeah, you'll get paid all right, but you won't have much use for money after tonight," sneered Greasy.

"I'm petrified, punk."

Greasy's hand flicked out and knocked the whiskey glass from Lee's hand. He stepped back a half-step, swung with his right as he came forward on his toes and his brown fist smacked against Lee's jaw. Lee went back and to his right. His head cracked against the top rail of the bar, clattered against a brass cuspidor in falling, and then smacked

against the inlaid linoleum. He twitched once and lay still.

Lee regained consciousness to the tune of little imps beating a tattoo against the inside of his skull with tiny trip-hammers. He groaned, turned flat on his back, stretched, yawned and then raised his hands to his head.

Pain ebbed and flowed billowingly. He felt as if he were riding in pain-wracked jerks on a sea of torture. Finally the pain jabs lessened and he shook his head slowly to clear away the cobwebs. He was able to navigate fairly true when he struggled to his feet.

A water basin of corroded metal in the corner had a single faucet and Lee filled the dirty bowl and dunked his head into it repeatedly. He felt better now; reached for a cigarette and found two-thirds of a package in his pocket. He puffed gratefully.

He smoked, thinking, until the cigarette tasted hot and acrid to his lips and he fired a fresh one abstractedly.

Of course there was hardly a chance but—

The room was small, roughly plastered. There was a small bed and a dresser with half the mirror gone. A cobwebby Mazda threw uncertain light. A window heavily barred with thick wire mesh was to the far side of the bed.

Lee inspected it and discovered a red brick wall within twelve inches; escape that way was impossible.

"Damn it!" said Lee tonelessly and flipped his cigarette away.

THREE was the sound of a pad-lock being unfastened outside. The door opened and Greasy Nordile entered. He was grinning ghoulishly. His gat was handy.

"Picture of a newspaper man at the end of his rope," he said in rare good humor. Lee saw the safety guard of the gat was wide open.

"That's strange," said Lee evenly, "when a rope would fit your neck so nicely."

Greasy flushed and a gleam of hatred stabbed from his black pools of eyes.

"Go ahead," he taunted, "wisecrack like you do in that lousy column of yours. It'll be easy to fill that job of yours after you're gone. Wonder who they'll put on the column after tomorrow?"

"I'm worried to death about it," returned Lee and reached for another smoke. Then he added, "I'll still be at the old stand."

"Yeah, but in a casket. You write too much in that column of yours and you tell too many things. But no more, see? You know too much."

"Like that Pulaski killing, for instance, eh?" Lee grinned tauntingly into Greasy's face. The man paled.

Suddenly he nodded. "Yeah, like the Pulaski killing," he said and his voice was ominously low.

A thought came to Lee, "Where's Charlie?"

Greasy grinned. "Aw, he's seen too much. Guess he'll have to tend bar in hell for a time."

Lee nodded, "I see. Old Charlie gets a ride, too, eh? Nice guy, you are, greaseball. You're not even a decent hood."

Greasy's fingers tightened around the automatic.

Lee laughed. "You wouldn't use that if you knew what I know. Say, greaseball, do you know what my paper is doing right now?"

"I don't get you," snarled Greasy. "You will in a minute. Well, I'll tell you. The city editor is working on headlines, Greasy, headlines. They probably read something like this: 'Famous Columnist Kidnaped. Greasy Nordile Known as the Kidnaper. Police Dragnet Out. Nordile Will Be Captured Soon Say Police.' How do they sound?"

Greasy laughed, but there was a note of nervous shrillness in it.

"You make me laugh," he said. "Yeah, you'll laugh, all right. And,

punk," Lee's voice took on a deadly seriousness which was not lost on Greasy, "those headlines will be written in red! Get me, *written in red!*"

"W-w-w-what do you mean?" faltered Greasy, face working.

Lee continued. "After the headlines are written, they send them to the composing room, Greasy. The linotype machines are as complicated as hell, but it isn't long before the story comes out in hot metal. I can just read it now, greaseball. It'll go about like this:

"Hundreds of police and detectives are looking for Greasy Nordile, a cheap hood who thinks he's a big shot. At an early hour this morning, Nordile and two of his men kidnaped Lee Ainsley, famed columnist of the *Star*, and Charlie Meeks, owner of a café.

"It is known that Lee Ainsley and Charlie Meeks are being held captives by Nordile and his men because the former printed thinly veiled innuendoes'—there's a ten-dollar word for you, Greasy—'saying that Nordile was soon to be questioned regarding the Pulaski murder mystery of a fortnight ago. It is said on most reliable information that Nordile will be in the hands of the police before noon today.'

"How's it sound, punk?" Lee laughingly taunted.

Greasy winced. "Smart guy," he said. "Well, just for that you go out now—"

THREE was the sound of running steps in the hallway outside. A man rushed into the room. In his hand was a newspaper with screaming headlines.

Headlines printed in red:

"Look, boss," he panted. "The paper is full of this kidnapin'! How'd the hell they find out about it? We'd better lam before the cops—"

Greasy snatched the newspaper from the man's hand. Lee saw it was the *Star* and grinned.

**STAR'S FAMOUS COLUMNIST MISSING!
KIDNAPED BY GREASY NORDILE!
CAFE PROPRIETOR ALSO TAKEN!**

Police Dragnet Thrown Wide!
Capture of Nordile Expected Quickly!

"How did they get this?" screamed Greasy, and his face was chalk-white. His fingers around the automatic were trembling and the gun was shaking and weaving.

There was the sudden hell of an inferno from below. A riot gun stuttered, punctuated by the blasts from Police Specials. A door crashed and there were the sounds of yells, trampling feet; a body smacked against the floor.

Lee grinned and there was excitement on his face now.

"Called the turn, didn't I, greaseball?"

Greasy Nordile screamed and jerked his gun higher to Lee's middle. His fingers contracted trembly, but Lee's fist caught him under the chin and the shot pinged against the wire mesh of the window. Lee dove and his shoulder caught the greaseball's solar.

Greasy slammed against the plaster with his head and squirmed over on the floor, his face smashed. Sounds came closer. There was the *wham* of a single shot and the man in the door doubled up and hit the floor head first, coughing.

"Hello, Griggs," said Lee, panting.

A broad patrolman barged in, gun ready. He grinned at Lee.

"Lo, Lee. You're a hell of a lot of trouble."

"Yeah, but looky, you get your name in the column for this, flatfoot."

"Gee, in *your* column, Mr. Ainsley!" There was awe on the cop's face and he grinned again.

Detectives filled the small room. Lee shook hands with Detective

Hobbs, in charge. Charlie, the bar-keep, crowded in and shook, too.

"Pretty good work, Lee," complimented Hobbs, and looked at Greasy.

"Aw, give the credit to Griggs; he's earned it. I always did like a guy who reads my column!" Lee grinned.

"Yeah," said Griggs, "I copied it down on this piece of paper. Here it is." He read slowly from the paper taken from his pocket.

Greasy N. got us—On spot—Search

N's places—Hurry. LEE AINSLEY

"You're a good cop, Griggs," said Lee. "I'm going to run your name in big caps tomorrow."

Griggs grinned.

"Say, Griggs," asked Lee, "when did you get that message?"

"About three, I guess it was. I was trying doors and saw that Charlie's place was wide open. Went in and couldn't see a soul. Walked over to the bar and saw something glittering like a beacon light. Looked close and then saw the writing on the bar. We'd heard Greasy had it in for you and of course he had to snatch Charlie, too, because he knew too much about your kidnaping. I got busy then."

"Good boy," said Lee again and reached for a cigarette.

The patrolman, Griggs, reached behind the flap of his coat and handed something to Lee.

"By the way, Mr. Ainsley," he said, "here's that diamond stickpin of yours you used to scratch the message on the red paint of Charlie's bar! Sure don't see how you had a chance to write it."

Lee said, "I sure had to work fast. Thought Greasy saw me writing it for a minute, but I got away with it. Don't see how you read it. Anyway," he grinned, "I always said that pin was worth more than ten bucks!"



Hal Robberts of the State Police played a long hunch on

The Masked Alibi



By John Gregory

SOMEWHERE in the gathering gloom of the Adirondack forest a twig snapped sharply. Corporal Hal Robberts, New York state trooper, halted, his whipcord body tensing beneath the trim gray and black uniform. For a moment he listened, his gloved hand sliding back to the comforting assurance of the big .45 Colt belted around the sheepskin coat.

Then he pushed slowly forward. A snow-covered branch caught the toe

of his snowshoe, tripping him. Simultaneously came the whiplike crack of a rifle. Something tugged sharply at the trooper's fur cap, whined off into the darkness.

Before the echoes of the shot had died, Robberts was wriggling his way to the shelter of a nearby spruce.

"Some crazy poacher," he muttered. There was no one else it could be, for on this particular assignment the lean-faced trooper carried no warrant in his pocket. But knowing the pe-

cular breed of men in the mountains Robberts slid the .45 into his hand and waited.

Only a fool would charge that hidden rifle with only a revolver. And Robberts was no fool. There were plenty of men in this remote section of the Adirondacks—men who had lived alone until their minds had slightly cracked—who would shoot down an officer if they feared arrest for some petty poaching offense.

Stealthily, foot by foot, the trooper wormed his way from the shelter of the pine. Taking advantage of every available bit of cover, ears keenly alert, eyes striving to pierce the gathering gloom, Robberts began a tortuous circle that should bring him to the rear of the spot which he had marked as the origin of the ambusher's shot. Suddenly, he stood erect with a muttered exclamation of disgust.

A trampled spot in the snow behind the bole of a huge spruce marked the ambusher's waiting place. Robberts picked a spent cartridge from the ground. But that meant nothing, for the cartridge was a .32-40, which would fit a third of the woodsmen's rifles. For a moment he stared at the webbed tracks of snowshoes that led off into the gloom, debating. Then he shrugged; no use to swing out on the trail tonight for in ten minutes pitch darkness would envelop the mountains. But he could camp nearby, and in the morning trail down the maker of those criss-crossed tracks.

For fifteen minutes the trooper slogged on through the snow and increasing cold. Suddenly he halted, staring at a steady gleam of light that flickered from the darkness a few hundred yards ahead of him.

Ten minutes later Robberts was standing before a rude cabin from which light streamed through dingy window panes. He paused for a moment, striking a match and examining a pair of snowshoes hanging from a

peg in the outside wall. But these were not the webs worn by that would-be killer back in the timber. Robberts knocked, then pushed open the door.

A BULKY man, face covered with a heavy growth of beard, arose and peered at the trooper through thick-lensed spectacles.

"Howdy, officer," the man said pleasantly, glancing at Robberts' black-striped breeches protruding from beneath the sheepskin coat. "Cold, ain't it?"

"Plenty," agreed Robberts, throwing cap and coat upon the bunk. "I'm looking for a place to hole up for the night."

"You've hit it," the bearded man returned cordially. "My name's Fred Dorgan. Been trapping some here, tryin' to make out the winter."

"Any luck?" asked Robberts idly.

Dorgan pointed with pride to several rows of furs hanging across the walls of the cabin. "Not bad. Average catch, I'd say. Take it easy while I rustle up a little grub.

What takes you out this weather, if it isn't an official secret?"

"No secret," the trooper said easily, "in fact, you may be able to help me. I'm Corporal Robberts, state trooper, from the Malone barracks. A bunch of us have been busy the past week searching for that big transport plane that crashed somewhere in the mountains. I happened to be assigned this territory. Haven't heard or seen anything of a crash around here, have you?"

Dorgan shook his head as he sliced bacon into a frying pan. "Nope, but that don't mean that the plane couldn't have cracked up not far away. Here in the cabin, with the wind howling outside, sounds don't carry from very far. Any passengers in the plane?"

Robberts shook his head. "No, just the pilot and co-pilot. The ship was



carrying a bank shipment of currency though, and there's been a great row raised about it."

He fished a paper from his pocket and opened it. "Pilot Walter Amsden, thirty-two, slender, brown hair. Co-pilot Frank Monroe, twenty-six, tall, redhead. That's their description."

"Tell you what," Dorgan volunteered, "I'll make the rounds of my line early in the morning, then go out with you. We might stumble on something."

A short time later Robberts pushed back from the crude table and reached for his pipe.

"Some one took a pop at me with a rifle, back in the timber tonight," he said casually.

The trooper fished the cartridge from his pocket, and rising, crossed to where a Winchester hung on the wall. But the weapon was a .30-30, and the empty shell in his hand was a .32-40.

"Who's got a grudge against the troopers up here?" Robberts snapped abruptly.

Dorgan hesitated. "No one I know of, unless—"

"Unless what?" barked the trooper. "I don't want to get any innocent party in trouble," Dorgan said uneasily, "but there's a queer old nut a few miles north of here that's apt to do 'most anything. Took a crack at me one day."

"What's his name?"
"Amos Norton," Dorgan answered, "he's got a .32-40 rifle, too."

"I've heard of him," Robberts said grimly. "One of the patrols brought him in to the precinct one day for poaching. He swore then he'd kill the next trooper he met in the woods."

"Well, if we're going to hunt for that crash in the morning, we'd better turn in," said Dorgan.

It was not yet dawn when Dorgan returned from his inspection of his trap line, and a short time later both men were slogging through deep snow into the timber.

"I've got only a few traps left out," Dorgan explained his short absence before dawn. "Been thinkin' of tryin' a different part of the country. Old Man Norton ain't what I call a desirable neighbor."

A short distance from Dorgan's cabin Robberts called a halt. "We'll separate here, and cover as much ground as possible. If either of us finds anything he can fire two quick shots to call the other. You tell me where Norton's shack is, and we'll meet near there, and pay the old boy a visit."

After Dorgan had given detailed directions for finding Norton's cabin, the two separated. For an hour Robberts followed the course of a small winding river. Suddenly a small black object near the foot of a spruce caught his attention. Curiously the trooper strode to the spot and looked down at a fine pine marten, securely imprisoned in a steel trap. The little animal was frozen stiff by the intense cold. Robberts examined the trap, staring for a long moment at the initials scratched in the steel. When he straightened a long whistle of satisfaction escaped his lips. Mind busy with a dozen thoughts he resumed his search.

The forenoon was half gone when Corporal Robberts broke through a protecting fringe of brush and gazed out over the frozen expanse of a tiny lake. And in the center of the lake lay a heap of blackened wreckage.

Hal drew his Colt and fired twice into the air before hurrying toward his find. When Dorgan came trotting across the little lake a short time later Robberts was still examining the remains of what had once been a big tri-motored Douglas.

"What a way to die!" Dorgan whispered in horror.

He was pointing at the snow-covered figure of a man sprawled a few yards from the wreck. Nodding in sombre agreement, Robberts turned the body over, gazed down into the

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features of a young man wearing the leather coat and goggles of a flyer.

"That's Co-pilot Monroe, all right," Robberts muttered. "Must have been thrown clear and struck his head on the ice. See, there's a bad wound there."

"And the pilot himself?" asked Dorgan.

Robberts pointed to the ghastly little heap of bones, charred leather, and cloth that he had salvaged from the débris.

"Let's hope the crash killed him," Dorgan mumbled nervously. "Let's get away from here, corporal. This mess gives me the creeps!"

"You've forgotten something," Robberts retorted. "There's supposed to be a box of currency around here somewhere!"

At the end of fifteen minutes' futile search Corporal Robberts gazed at Dorgan with a queer light in his steel-gray eyes.

"Maybe it burned with the plane," Dorgan ventured.

"Impossible," snapped the trooper. "The box was fire-proof. Dorgan, there's dirty work here. Some one's salvaged \$75,000 from this crash and made off with it!"

Dorgan said nothing, but his lips slowly framed a name. Robberts nodded, strapped the snowshoes again on his feet.

"We're making a little call right now on your friend, Amos Norton!"

Sun danced blindingly on dazzling white snow as the trooper and Dorgan cautiously approached Norton's ramshackle cabin. A tenuous thread of smoke eddying from the crazy chimney was the only sign of life about the place.

Hand on holstered Colt ready for instant action, Robberts boldly approached the cabin. A hard shove of his shoulder sent the rickety door flying wide open. Gun in hand, the state trooper lunged through the doorway, Dorgan at his heels. One brief look showed that the single-room cabin was empty. But a can of water sim-

mered on the stove, and supplies and equipment were scattered carelessly everywhere.

"Looks as if he's coming back, anyway," remarked Robberts. "Watch for him, Dorgan, while I take a look for that money."

A THOROUGH search of the cabin revealed no trace of the missing currency. Robberts stepped outside and glanced keenly around the cabin walls. A sizable pile of firewood was stacked neatly against one end of the shack. The next moment the trooper began a systematic dismantling of the piled wood.

Suddenly he straightened, a gleam of triumph in his eyes. In his hand was a shiny metal box. The missing money container! Eagerly he opened it, peered inside. Crisp green bank notes, neatly packed in a small bundle, partially filled the box. Carefully Robberts counted them, whistling softly in satisfaction. Though only a small portion of the lost cash was in the box the tall man in uniform seemed hugely content as he hurried back into the cabin.

"Found part of it," he jerked at the watching Dorgan. "Enough to convict the old fox, anyway. He'd hid it in the woodpile."

"Good!" Dorgan smiled, then—"Look out! Norton's coming!"

Robberts ducked down, then cautiously peered through the dirty window. A lanky old man was shuffling through the snow toward the cabin, rifle swinging from one hand. Dangling over one shoulder were the furry carcasses of a fox and several mink. As the trapper came closer Robberts stared with interest at the crafty, lined face and small, glittering eyes.

Amos Norton suddenly stopped, his eyes falling to the trampled tracks in the snow. At the same moment Robberts leaped through the doorway, his Colt swung up.

"Put 'em up, Norton!"

With an animal-like snarl Norton swung the rifle to his hip and fired. The crashing report of the police .45 boomed upon the cold air as Norton's bullet whistled inches away from the trooper's head. As the rifle, smashed by the impact of the big revolver bullet, dropped from his hand, Norton leaped forward with a shrill cry, a long-bladed hunting knife springing like magic into his hand. Robberts was plunging at him, grimly shoving his gun back into the holster.

A shot cracked from the cabin door, missing Norton's head narrowly.

"Stop it, you fool!" the trooper yelled over his shoulder. "I'll handle this!"

Then the trapper closed in, eyes gleaming with maniacal rage. He slashed once, downward, as the trooper ducked. The blade sliced the sleeve of the sheepskin coat from shoulder to elbow, then Robberts had the knife wrist in a grasp of iron.

For a moment the two men were locked in a motionless embrace of straining muscles. Norton's strength was enormous for a man of his age, and for a moment Robberts was hard put to hold his own. Then with a lightning twist Robberts slid his free hand behind Norton's neck, clamping it with his left upon the upraised knife hand. Exerting every ounce of muscle he possessed the trooper jerked. Norton fell heavily; the officer's body dropped on top. A moment of furious scuffling in the snow and Robberts arose, dragging the manacled trapper with him.

"Bad business, Norton, shooting at an officer, and robbing wrecked airplanes!"

"You dirty, interferin' state cop!" Norton mouthed, spitting snow and invective from his snarling mouth. "I'm sorry I missed ye last night!"

"So you admit shooting at me, and robbing the mail plane?" Robberts snapped.

"What? What's that about robbin' a mail plane?" Well-feigned astonishment spread over the trapper's dirty

face. "Sure I shot at ye, and I'm sorry I missed! But I don't know what you're talking about when ye speak of a plane. I ain't seen no plane!"

Robberts held the packet of money before Norton. "Ever see that before?"

THE look of bewilderment vanished from Norton's crafty features, to be replaced by fear. Abruptly he shut his traplike mouth and refused to speak again.

"No use in staying here any longer," Robberts grunted to Dorgan. "Bring his gun and come on; we'll stay tonight at your cabin and I'll take him in in the morning."

At Dorgan's cabin Robberts secured his captive firmly to the bunk, then turned to watch Dorgan as the big man built a fire in the rusty stove and started preparations for supper. When the simple meal was over, Robberts leaned his chair against the door and smoked for a moment lazily.

"Hope you don't have any trouble taking Norton in tomorrow," Dorgan said finally. "You just let me know when you want me to testify, and I'll be on hand."

"No," the trooper drawled, "I don't expect any trouble. Of course, handling a pair of prisoners isn't a kid's job, but I guess I can swing it."

"A pair of prisoners!" Dorgan wheeled in surprise. "Why, where's your other one?"

Robberts rose slowly to his feet, his right hand hooked carelessly in the wide cartridge belt.

"Showdown, mister," he shot back, all the softness gone from his voice. "I arrest you, Walter Amsden, for the murder of Fred Dorgan and Frank Monroe!"

For a pregnant moment the silence of death hung over the stuffy little room. Dorgan wheeled slowly from the stove, his face for a moment a malignant mask. Then his features relaxed.

"What're you talking about, trooper? You're telling me that I'm Ams-

den, the pilot of that Douglas? You're crazy! Your own description of Amsden says he was a slender man with brown hair. Well, take a look at me!"

"I'm looking at you," Robberts said quietly. "You were pretty clever, Amsden, but you slipped up on two or three little things. I first became suspicious when I looked around while you were supposed to be making the rounds of your trap lines and found that there wasn't a sign of extra clothing about the place. A slender man, who'd dyed his hair, might put on a lot of additional clothes to make himself look bigger. So I kept my eyes open. This morning I found a marten in a trap marked with Dorgan's initials. That meant you didn't know the location of Dorgan's traps!"

"A fine lot of rot."

"Oh, that isn't all," Robberts said placidly, "you interrupted me. You planned this 'crash,' Amsden, for some time, marking the location of both Dorgan's and Norton's cabins. You even had the dye to change the color of your hair with you. You simply landed on that lake, probably already having killed the co-pilot in his seat. You came to Dorgan, got all the information about him and Norton you could. Then you killed him, changed clothes with him, and after placing him in the plane and leaving Monroe clear for future identification, you burned the ship.

"But just to make sure, you planted a small part of the money at Norton's cabin. When he took a shot at me last night, he was playing right into your hands."

Dorgan, or Amsden, shifted his feet nervously.

"But here's what's going to send you to the chair, Amsden!" Robberts cried suddenly, pointing to the shiny money box. "Your big mistake was in leaving the money you planted on Norton still in the box. For the paint on that box wasn't even scorched, showing it was taken from the plane, before the burning, not after!"

As the words fell upon the silence like a bombshell, the room erupted into violent action. With a lightning swing of his arm Amsden seized the pan of scalding dish water from the stove and flung it straight at Robberts' face. As the trooper attempted to duck his foot slipped and he went half to his knees. Half of the contents of the pan splashed agonizingly into his face, blinding him. Instinctively his finger contacted upon the trigger of the Colt.

The bullet smashed through the flimsy stove, scattering a shower of flaming coals upon the floor. Simultaneously the roaring form of Amsden crashed into the trooper, rocking him with flailing, vicious blows.

He groped, once, for the gun dangling from its lanyard. Instantly Amsden's fist closed on his wrist, while the pilot's other muscular hand gripped the trooper's throat.

With a mighty effort Robberts brought his right knee up to Amsden's stomach, shoved with all his strength. The murderer staggered, mouthing maniacal curses, suddenly whirled and lunged toward the rifle standing in a corner. Frantically Robberts fumbled for his .45. Amsden's rifle came up, leveled, just as the trooper's hand closed over the butt of the Colt.

Red murder stared from Amsden's glaring eyes as Robberts squeezed the trigger. Two thundering reports filled the cabin, pounded on Robberts' ears through a fog of pain and powder smoke.

Amsden slumped, completely cowed, in a corner, nursing a shattered shoulder. On the bunk old Amos Norton regarded the trooper with admiring eyes.

"By cracky, you state cops kin fight, at that," he said excitedly. "I ain't goin' to crack down on a state policeman agin! I had you figured for a bunch of nosy snoopers, but anybody that kin figure out a mess like this is okay!"

Satan's Showdown

By Paul Adams

Belden was in love with another woman—wanted his wife out of the way. His scheme of freedom looked clever and simple enough to be faultless.

E VERETT BELDEN dropped the newspaper he had been reading into his lap and glanced up impatiently at the sound of his wife's hurrying footsteps on the floor above. For the hundredth time since dinner he glanced at his wrist watch, mumbled something that sounded like a curse, and picked up his paper again. Hell, wouldn't she ever get started? His eyes bored into the print before him but the news of the world at this particular moment interested him not in the least. The cigar held tightly between his teeth had gone cold. At length he threw the newspaper to the table, rose from his chair and began to pace the floor. He was standing in front of the fireplace, staring blankly into the glowing embers, when Alice Belden came hurrying down the stairs. There came a retching of brakes in the street outside, then the raucous shriek of an automobile horn.

"Thank heavens," said Alice Belden as she wrapped a Spanish shawl around her slim figure, "for once I am on time."

"Or is it that the Grigsbys are late?" commented her husband peevishly, again looking at his watch.

"Huh, nine o'clock! You've been just an hour and a half fixing yourself."

Alice Belden laughed. "Of course," she replied, her fingers imparting lightning swift finishing touches to her auburn hair, "you wouldn't want your little wife to look a fright

amongst the lionesses of Haynesville society. Mrs. Garner—Mrs. Theodore Garner if you please—is one of the hostesses. Mrs. George Calder and the portly Mrs.—oh!"

The horn outside shrieked again. Mrs. Belden snatched up her bag, blew a farewell kiss to her husband, and hurried as fast as her high, pointed heels would allow for the front door. As she swung it open she turned.

"Don't wait up for me, dear," she said and then was gone.

Everett Belden hurried to the window. Drawing a curtain aside he looked out into the night for several moments until the little red light at the rear of the Grigsby's car had disappeared around a corner. Then he hurried out into the hall and picked up the telephone. A low curse broke the silence as Belden waited impatiently for the operator to answer the signal. A vigorous attack on the hook, however, soon brought results.

"Hello, Ted," he said finally as a familiar voice seeped into his ear from the other end of the wire. "Locust and State in half an hour. All right?"

"Okay."

Belden smiled, hung up the receiver and fairly ran up the stairs to his room. Twenty minutes later he came down dressed in dinner clothes and humming a lilting tune. A hasty nip from a bottle procured from the cabinet of the radiola and then he was struggling into a topcoat.



IT WAS after one when Belden returned. As he swung his roadster into the driveway he cast a jaundiced eye upward to the window of his wife's bedroom and chuckled. There was no light burning there. Alice had never failed to leave one burning in case she arrived home before her husband. She was very thoughtful at times. Belden switched off the ignition of his motor and eased his frame out of the car. As his hand rested momentarily on the cushioned seat it closed over something soft and fluffy. Quickly he snatched it up and held it in front of his face. The haunting odor of an exotic perfume delighted his nostrils. With a startled oath he crumpled it into a tiny ball and walked out of the garage.

A few minutes later he stood in front of the fireplace in his living room and watched a dainty bit of linen slowly become part of the heap of dying embers in the grate. Its fragrant scent, however, still lingered.

Belden went upstairs, changed into his pajamas and dressing gown and retraced his steps to the first floor for a drink. He felt that he needed it at this moment. A satisfied grin played on his face as he became aware that the betraying odor had disappeared. He had washed his hands thoroughly with soap potent with carbolic. In business Belden had always prided himself on being thorough. He had always derived a fiendish joy in picking up loose ends. They would never catch him napping on that score. He poured himself a stiff drink and downed it in one gulp—then another, after which, settling back in his chair, Belden confronted a problem with which he had been struggling for weeks. He had made up his mind on the way home that he would settle it this night, once and for all.

Belden did not mince matters with himself. He had ceased to love his wife and further existence under this humdrum roof would drive him mad. He dismissed the idea of running away with the woman with whom he

had become infatuated. If there was anything obnoxious in the world to Everett Belden it was scandal, and it would be sure to sweep over Haynesville like a hurricane if he ran away from Alice with another woman. No, he could not do that. There had to be another way, one that would not violate the laws of convention. Damn convention! But there was his business and his own irreproachable reputation in the community. He poured another drink. As the glass touched his lips, his head thrown back to let the burning liquor flow down his throat, his eyes focussed on a picture hanging on the wall. It was an enlarged snapshot of Alice and himself taken several years ago. He remembered it well. They had just stepped out of a canoe and Bill Adler had snapped them. Lake Mahoga, that was it—Belden leaped half out of his chair, then sank back again. The picture had implanted the germ of an idea in his brain. Slowly it took root and grew to mammoth proportions. As the clock in the living room rang out the second hour of early morn, Everett Belden had firmly made up his mind. He was going to murder his wife.

WHEN Alice Belden came home a few minutes later she did not find her husband sitting there, rigid and constricted, his hands gripping the arms of his chair with fingers like talons. Neither did she look into a face as grey as a rock, its lips trembling. Everett Belden was thorough. He stood calmly in the center of the living room as she came in, a smile on his face as he glanced significantly at his watch.

"Now don't scold me, Everett," she exclaimed with a weary laugh. "I thought the thing would never break up. Had abominable luck at bridge—but see what I brought you. You're not to open it until your other bottle is bone dry. I insist. This is really special stuff. Mrs. Garner told me."

They both sat down on the divan in front of the fireplace.

"Just to show you that I appreciate your thoughtfulness, Alice," Belden began laughingly, closely scanning the seal on the bottle, "I'm going to take you up to Lake Mahoga over the week-end. See that picture up there on the wall? Was looking at it tonight and thinking how great it would be if just you and I ran up there in the car, say start at noon Saturday and come back Sunday night. Rough it a bit. We both need it. What do you say?"

"Splendid! I'd love it, Everett," replied Alice, the drowsiness in her eyes giving way to a sparkling exuberance. "Just like another honeymoon, you dear old thing. I'll order things from the grocer tomorrow."

Everett Belden did not hear the rest of his wife's excited chattering. His eyes stared at the embers of the fire and in them he saw a face, the face of a dark-haired, beautiful woman whose smile had haunted him for weeks, whose eyes burned with an unfathomable flame, whose red lips beckoned. He rose mechanically to his feet as he felt a touch on his arm.

"You're tired to death, Everett. Come, it's time you were in bed." His wife's words seemed to come from miles away.

Friday night found the Beldens enjoying a quiet evening at home. Everything had been made ready for the trip starting at noon on the following day. At a secretary in one corner of the room Alice Belden was busy writing a letter. Her husband sat in his favorite chair apparently absorbed in a detective thriller, the inevitable cigar in his mouth, an empty highball glass at his elbow. At length Mrs. Belden looked up and broke the silence.

"Everett," she said, don't you think it would be wise to ask Arthur Mallory to buy ten shares of Amalgamated Rails instead of five as we had planned? It's acting very well and—"

"Of course, dear," answered Everett Belden, absently, without taking his eyes from the page before him.

"Of course. Use your own judgment. Give Art my regards."

Another prolonged silence punctuated only by the occasional scribble of Alice Belden's pen and the rustle of papers as she delved into the intricate business of keeping the Belden financial affairs straight. She looked up at the sound of glass clinking against glass. Her husband was preparing another drink. A slight knitting of her brows, an enigmatic smile, and she went to work again. Her eyes suddenly rested on a slip of paper.

"Horrors!" she exclaimed.

"Huh?"

"Everett, I have just averted a catastrophe. I have just discovered the notice that your insurance premium is due. If anything had happened to you —oh! I hate to think of it. Little Alice would have had to go out and work by the day—"

Belden smiled and turned back to his reading.

AT NOON the following day Everett Belden and his wife loaded provisions and a small canvas tent into the back of their roadster and started for Lake Mahoga. As the car rolled out of the drive, their neighbors, the Waynes, waved to them from their veranda. A few hundred feet down the street Everett stopped for gas and exchanged pleasantries with Ed Akers, a business associate, whose car was ahead of his at the tank. Five minutes later he drew up alongside a curb and hailed Bill Adler, who was hurrying home from his office. It seemed that Belden had forgotten the quickest route to Lake Mahoga.

"Hope you and Alice have a good time, Everett," said Adler after imparting the desired information. "Sky seems kind of overcast, though. Better let Alice handle the canoe if it gets choppy. She's an expert, you know."

"Surest thing you know, Bill," grinned Belden, patting his wife's hand affectionately as it rested on the wheel in front of him. Everett Bel-

den was thorough. "See you Monday, old timer," he flung over his shoulder as the car sped away.

Thirty-six hours later Haynesville was stunned by a terrible tragedy. The news came over the wires from Stirling, two miles above Lake Mahoga. Everett Belden's wife, Alice, had been drowned when the canoe in which the couple had been paddling had capsized. Belden himself had been pulled ashore exhausted after a futile attempt to save his wife, who, unable to swim a stroke, had been carried over the falls. Everett Belden drove into town behind the undertaker's grim vehicle, to all appearances a broken man. Until early

LATE in the evening preceding the funeral Belden was left alone with his dead. The pungent, sickeningly sweet odor of the heterogeneous heaps of flowers piled high about the casket in the adjoining room permeated every crevice of the house. In a big chair near the massive table in the library Belden sat staring into space, a thin smile on his lips. He admitted to himself that it had been much harder than he had expected it would be. The shriek of terror as the canoe capsized, the frantic threshing about in the water as she strove to keep afloat, her strangulated cries, and then the white hand above the



morn he had helped in the search for his wife's body, which had been found at last wedged against a fallen tree that bridged the stream.

Haynesville came in a steady stream to the home of the bereaved man offering deepest sympathies. A pall of gloom hung over the town. Everyone was of the opinion that the Beldens had been an ideal couple. The injustice of it all. A second honeymoon converted into stark tragedy. Floral pieces filled to overflowing the Belden living room, in which the body lay. And through it all, Everett Belden walked with shoulders stooped to sorrow, accepting like a man in a trance the regrets coming from deep down in the heart of Haynesville.

water, its fingers clawing convulsively until they sank beneath the surface. He had acted his part well. He knew that the people of Haynesville were convinced. He laughed softly, but it sounded like a bellow in that house stilled by the presence of death. He did not care to laugh again, not until that still form in the room beyond was taken away forever. Then he would be free to own that vision of voluptuous beauty for whom he had done this.

The thought of her deadened the last twinge of conscience in his soul. They would go away when the time was opportune, to Switzerland, Vienna, Cairo. Nothing else in the world would matter. Everett Belden rose from his chair and on steady legs

walked over to a closet to which he had transferred his stock of liquor. He swung the door open and glanced at the array of bottles. A low exclamation leaped from his lips. There stood his wife's last gift to him, a bottle of pre-war stuff from the Garner's private store. The irony of it! It would bolster him up for the final ordeal on the morrow. If he had ever needed the consolation of strong spirits Belden felt that he needed it now.

Walking back to the table he removed its leaden cap and reached into his pocket for the corkscrew that was fitted on the end of his watch chain. The sound of the popping cork a moment later was like a rifle shot in the unearthly silence. Belden coughed nervously and poured a full glass of the amber liquid. He drained this in a gulp. Followed another—still another. Then he sat down with a sigh of relief as the warm liquor flowed like liquid fire through his veins. He snapped out the light and walked over to a leather couch near the fireplace in which a log glowed bloody red. Everett Belden slumped down on the cushions preparatory to stretching out for the rest of the night. Sleep was impossible but—an agonized gasp split the stillness of the room.

Belden sprawled back on the couch, his fingers crooked convulsively, the

color ebbing horribly from his face. His body writhing in the throes of a stabbing paroxysm, he fell to the floor. After several tortured moments, Belden drew a choking breath and started to crawl desperately toward the telephone in the hall just outside. With death agony written on his face, his eyes wide open and staring like a basilisk, the dying man wormed his way across the carpet. After what seemed an endless nightmare of pain he reached the little mahogany table and tried to lift his body from the floor. Just as clammy fingers clutched at the table top another violent convulsion seized him and sent him writhing to the floor, a horrible sound issuing from his throat. With a crash the telephone and table on which it stood clattered down on his prostrate body. Belden was dead.

From the tomb-like silence of the room beyond came a low, mocking laugh. Or was it the dry rustling sound of the wind-tossed branches against the leaves outside? No one would ever know. But if that inanimate thing of glass containing the lethal fluid, which had wrung a man's soul from his body, could have spoken, it might have warned Everett Belden that it had contained the death planned for him by a wife whose love had long since turned to a lust for gold.



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Second-Hand Suicide

Novelette



The Irishman's fist crashed on his jaw.

By Harry Widmer

E *The kid wanted easy money, bright lights and the glamour girls. He was ripe—ready to be plucked by a vicious dealer in destinies who ruled a metropolis.* **B**



ahead. Even his feet seemed to reflect his mood as he doggedly climbed the narrow staircase to his dingy hall room above.

Grumbling to himself he opened the door to his five-dollar-a-week cubby hole. Halfway across the thres-

YOUNG WILLY MOORE was down in the dumps. His boyish face was set in brooding lines. His eyes looked down rather than straight

hold he came to a dead standstill. There, sprawled out on his bed, was a pimply-faced man. At Willy's entrance, the man tossed aside a newspaper and bared a row of yellow teeth in a grin.

"Lo, kid." He lazily came to a sitting position.

Willy stepped forward eagerly. "Why—hello, Vesey. Gee, this is a surprise."

The man called Vesey dragged deeply on the cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. "Say, kid, ya look tired. Jes' gettin' home from

work?" A cunning look came into Vesey's eyes as he noted the boy's grumbling assent. "Yeah, I remember," went on the man, "you drive a delivery truck for Steven's department store. How are the hours, kid?"

"Rotten!" Willy bit off the word. "Seven forty-five in the morning to five at night—by the time clock."

Vesey nodded sympathetically. "Never did like those dam' time clocks myself." He eyed the boy slyly. "Ya in the market for a *real* job, kid?"

The lad took two eager steps forward. "Gee, Vesey, you know how I've been trying to get in with the mob—"

Vesey nodded again. "I know, kid," he said slowly, "an' I've been talkin' to the boss about ya. I told him how yer've been hangin' around the poolroom—an' wantin' to join up with the mob. Well, he wouldn't listen at first." Vesey tapped the boy's chest importantly. "But I talked ya up big. Now—Mike Dogra *himself* wants ter see ya!"

"Gee whiz!" murmured Willy. "You mean to sit there and tell me that Mike Dogra, the big shot, wants to talk to—me?"

Vesey grinned through a cloud of cigarette smoke. "Not only wants ter see ya—but is interested."

Willy dropped his cigarette to the threadbare linoleum and stepped on it. He looked squarely at the grinning man on the bed. "Now let me get this straight, Vesey. You mean that seeing Dogra might lead to a place in the mob? It would mean I wouldn't have to punch a lousy time clock any more?"

"Not only that, kid. Ya could give up this dump an' live like a ritzy mug. Instead of drivin' a truck—yer'd have some punk drivin' you around. An' nifty broads—Jees, ya could take yer pick." Vesey grinned to himself when he saw the effect of his word pictures on the routine-sick boy.

Willy set his hat at a rakish angle. "Well, Vesey, when do we see Mike Dogra?"

TWENTY minutes later, Vesey brought his sedan to a stop several yards away from an all-night restaurant. He turned to Willy, who was nervously puffing on a cigarette. The prospect of an interview with Mike Dogra, gang god, would shake the nerves of any young, aspiring gangster. Vesey nudged Willy. "Go into Pete's place there an' eat yer dinner. Hang around until I come fer ya." Vesey grasped the boy's arm with a warning pressure. "An' don't say nothin' to nobody. Get me?" The gangster's voice hardened. "An' that goes double fer that fresh mick, Halleran. You an' him have been kinda chummy, ain't ya?"

Willy nodded.

"Well," barked Vesey, "I don't have ter tell ya that a real pal is a guy that comes through fer ya—like I did, talkin' ya up to Dogra. An' what's that punk, Halleran, ever done fer ya?"

Willy's jaw squared. "Listen, Vesey: Dan Halleran is a right fellow. You and him ain't so hot on each other—but he's a good guy."

"Aw right," growled Vesey. "But don't spill him nothin'—or it's all off with you an' Dogra."

Willy promised that he wouldn't breathe a word. He climbed out of the sedan and went into the restaurant. At the counter, he called for a hot roast beef sandwich, French fries and peas. While waiting for his order to come from the kitchen, he walked down the counter and picked out a slice of blackberry pie. Then he felt a strong hand grasp his arm and turn him around.

The newcomer was a rather good-looking, square-jawed Irishman. "Hello, Willy," he greeted the boy pleasantly. "For a minute I wasn't sure if it was you or not." Before Willy could answer, Halleran nodded

down the counter. "Grab your roast biff and come over to my table."

Willy turned away, glad for a moment's time to pull himself together. Dan Halleran coming up like that had taken his breath for a moment. When the boy slid into the chair opposite the Irishman, he was prepared to follow Vesey's instructions of "tellin' nothin' to nobody."

"How's the job coming along, Willy?" Halleran's teeth flashed in a smile.

Willy speared a French fry with his fork. "Job's not so bad, Dan. Might get a raise on the first. The head shipper said—"

"Cut the comedy, youngster. You're not kidding anybody." Halleran studied the boy's face. "What's up, Willy? You can tell me—you know that."

The French fries went down whole. "Why nothing, Dan—"

Halleran laid down his knife. "Listen, you," he said slowly, "be a smart lad—and don't get mixed up in anything with Vesey. He'd double-cross himself if he could think up a way to do it. Lay off that bozo. He's rotten from his yellow streak out."

Willy squirmed in his chair. "Gee, Dan, we've always been good pals. The last thing in the world I want to happen is—be on the outs with you. Gosh, you know I want to get in with the mob. I'm sick of punching a time clock while all the fellers I know are buying cars and taking girls on big parties. Gosh, I'm human."

Halleran cut off a slice of lamb but didn't eat it. "Listen, Willy, I'm not gonna preach to you. You have a head of your own—use it. There's lots of ways of being human—as you call it—without getting mixed up with a mob."

Willy knew what was coming, and he had his age-old question ready. "If the mob's such a lousy idea, why are you in it?"

Halleran pushed his now cold lamb aside. "Willy, nobody gave a damn what I did. And I've been in it long

enough to know that it's no place for a nice kid like you. Get wise to yourself."

WHEN Vesey left his sedan, he went into a doorway next to Pete's place and up a flight of stairs to Mike Dogra's hideout. His pimply face split in a yellow-tooth grin as he walked up to the big shot's desk.

Dogra, neat as a pin in a tailored blue suit, patent leather shoes and spats, looked up at Vesey's approach. His thin, sharp features showed absolutely no expression. His coal black eyes were as dull as those in a dead fish.

"Well?" the word crawled around the cigar between his straight, colorless lips.

"Nothin' to it, boss. The sap thinks he's gonna polish his shoes with grand bills. He's ripe fer pluckin'."

Dogra said nothing. Vesey suddenly felt ill at ease and looked around awkwardly for a chair. The nearest one was beside Dogra's desk. He slid into it. After several moments of silence, he found his voice:

"I did some slick work all around on this job, eh, boss?"

Dogra looked at him and a strange, half-sneering smile twisted his lips. "You did."

Vesey stabbed a nicotine-stained forefinger at an elaborate silver picture frame standing on Dogra's desk. "I was leery of that broad of yours fer a long time, boss. An' when I sees her steppin' out with that society guy, Reynolds, I got hep that there was monkey business goin' on. Then when I waits four hours fer her to come outa his apartment—I knows damn well there was."

Dogra's eyes were fastened on a photograph resting in the big silver frame. Looking straight at him was the soft oval face of a strikingly pretty blonde. Her cosmetic-darkened eyes held a seductive lure. And her rouge-glistening, artificial lips were curled in a provocative smile. Under that enticing face was the inscription

— *Devotedly, Your Lola.* Dogra laughed. It was a sinister, almost inhuman sound. And it chilled Vesey to the marrow.

"You were saying—" prompted Dogra.

But that laugh that came like the dank breath of the grave, filled the gangster with misgivings. It made him think of corpses—the morgue—and the terrible hour before a man is dragged to the electric chair. Vesey licked his lips. "Say, boss, ain't there some other way besides croakin' that Reynolds mug? Cripes! If he gets bumped off, this damn town will turn inside out to catch the killer. Jees, everytime he sneezes it's on the front page. An' ya gotta think of his old man. The old mug is president of the First National. Cripes! The police commissioner himself will go chasin' the guy what bumps young Reynolds!"

Dogra nodded and that creepy smile slithered across his thin lips. "Yes, I know . . . But he won't have to look far."

Vesey came out of his chair. Somehow, Dogra's cold, utterly unemotional voice restored him to his former frame of mind. He jerked his head in the general direction of Pete's restaurant. "I got that kid you wanted down there. He's as dumb as hell—" Vesey hesitated a moment. "Jees, boss, are ya sure there's gonna be no slip-up? This Reynolds business is dynamite!"

The gangster chief's dull eyes flicked to the photograph in the silver frame. His greasy, black head swayed from side to side. "No, Vesey, there'll be no slip-ups on *this* job. No slip-ups. I'm attending to the last part of it—myself."

Vesey's yellow teeth were bared in a hyena-like grin. He paused at the back of the chair. "Shall I bring the kid up, boss? Cripes! You'll get a big laugh outa him. He thinks he's gonna meet a king or somethin'—"

Then Vesey felt the gang chief's dead-cold eyes boring into him.

"Well, isn't he?" asked Dogra softly.

The lieutenant mumbled a hasty assurance and scurried from the suddenly chilled room.

WILLY followed Vesey into Dogra's office. The lad walked with a quick, swinging stride that was to impress his energy and youthfulness on the gang chief. He crossed the room and stood beside the chair at Dogra's desk.

Vesey nudged him. "Take a load off yer feet, kid."

Willy swallowed his nervousness in a supreme effort to impress the gang lord. He dropped into the chair and casually crossed his legs. Holding his middle finger by his thumb, he flicked his hat to the back of his head by snapping free his middle finger. He pulled a freshly-opened pack of Lucky Strikes from his pocket and offered it to Dogra.

"Yes, thanks," smiled Dogra. He took one and held a fancy desk lighter to light Willy's cigarette. Then he held the flame to his own.

Vesey looked at Dogra as if his eyes deceived him. He knew the chief despised cigarettes.

While Dogra was lighting his Lucky, Willy had a chance to take a close look at the notorious gangster who held a city in his grasp. And Willy felt a shiver race down his spine. Never had he seen such a cold, stony face. That white, slimy skin belonged to a bloodless creature of the sea. It seemed to Willy that there couldn't be a drop of warm blood in the man's body.

Vesey broke the silence with, "Say, boss, I found the kid chinnin' with Halleran. Do ya think he spilled—"

"Button up your lip," snapped Dogra. "And if you and Halleran don't get over your damn fool grouch—somebody's going to get hurt." Dogra turned slowly toward Willy. "You know Dan Halleran?"

"Sure, Mister Dogra," and Willy tried hard to smile at the shark-like

face before him. Dogra made no comment. So Willy went on, "Dan's regular, but he's old-fashioned. He said I should keep away from mobs—"

A growl rumbled in Vesey's throat. He took a step forward. "There ya are, boss! I told ya that mick was phoney. I—"

Dogra raised his eyes to the gangster. His words came slowly, softly-spoken, "Get out of this room—before I blow you out."

Vesey got out fast, mouthing dire oaths under his breath.

"Now," Dogra smiled at the boy, "tell me Halleran's objections to—er—my mob."

Willy read a menace to his friend in that sneering smile of Dogra's. "Gee, Mister Dogra, you mustn't hold that against Dan. He's on the level with the mob. He hasn't any objections. Gee, you gotta believe me. Dan only meant that I was too much of a kid for the big game. That's all he meant—honest!"

"Of course," Dogra raised his slim hand in an understanding gesture. "Don't worry about Halleran. He's one of my best men." The gangster looked at the ash on Willy's cigarette and pushed a bronze receiver toward him. Willy grinned his thanks. Then Dogra leaned back in his swivel chair. "So you want to join my boys, eh?"

"Yes, sir!" Willy uncrossed his legs and pushed himself to the edge of the chair. "I keep my eyes open—and my mouth shut."

Dogra smiled knowingly. "You'll make a name for yourself in this town—before long." The gangster picked up his French phone and called a number. "Hello, Pete? . . . Yes, me . . . Vesey there? . . . No, I don't want to talk to him. Tell him to get Joe and bring my car around front."

Dogra hung up. Leaving his desk, he took up his snap-brim gray hat and gloves from a nearby table. Carefully adjusting the hat on his pomaded head, he drew on his gloves. He smiled at Willy.

"Well, boy, I'm going to take you along tonight and show you where to collect. You've got the right stuff in you. I'll take a chance on you coming through."

Willy bounded out of the chair. "Gee, Mister Dogra, you won't be taking a chance on me. I'll come through O.K." Willy punched his fist into his open palm. "Gee, this a big night for me!"

Dogra smiled. "Yes, it's going to be." Then his gaze flicked to the seductive-eyed girl in the silver frame. A hollow, chilling laugh escaped his twisted lips.

And Willy suddenly felt his collar grow tight. He ran his forefinger under it, but it was still tight. Cold beads of perspiration studded his forehead. Silently, he left the office. Dogra followed, snapping off the lights.

IT SEEMED to Willy, as they rode along a dimly-lighted street, that Mike Dogra could afford a much better car than the one he was using tonight. A dull, nondescript paint job was not the car he, Willy, would pick, if he were gang lord of a big city. And he'd have a classy chauffeur. Not the bull-necked Joe who now crouched over the wheel in the front seat.

So absorbed was Willy in the thoughts of what he would have, that he did not notice the tense, strained manner of the pasty-faced Vesey on his left. On his right was Dogra, silent and as cold as ever.

Dogra leaned across Willy to Vesey. "Let me see your rod, Vesey," he asked casually.

Vesey's gloved hand darted to his shoulder holster and jerked out a .38 automatic. He passed it over to Dogra without a word. The gang chief made sure of the safety catch, then looked at Willy.

"Bet you never held a rod in your hand," he smiled.

Willy sat up. "Oh, yeah? Say, Mister Dogra, a cannon and me are twins."

Dogra smiled again. "Here—take this and show me how a red-hot holds his gat."

And the automatic passed from Dogra's gloved hand to Willy's bare fingers.

"Like this," demonstrated the lad.

"Not quite," Dogra shook his head. "A real rodman keeps his wrist straight. The recoil from a heavy gun would break it, if he didn't. Yes, that's right. Now if you wanted to hit a man over the head, how would you hold it?"

Willy reversed the automatic and grasped it by the shiny barrel.

Vesey chuckled as if he were enjoying the lesson. And he was.

"No," Dogra frowned. "You might jar the hammer. And with the muzzle pointing at you—where would you be?"

Willy bit his lip. "Gee, I won't muff again. Ask me something else."

"How do you load it?" Dogra obliged him.

The lad took out the clip and held it up.

"Now put it back," prompted Dogra. "And give me the rod."

Willy replaced the clip and handed over the gun. Dogra took it but did not return it to Vesey. Instead he held it lightly in his gloved hand.

Vesey leaned forward and touched Joe's shoulder. "Slow down. This is the street," he clipped.

Looking out, Willy saw that they were in the downtown business section. Skyscrapers loomed majestically on both sides of the narrow street.

Suddenly Vesey tapped Dogra's knee and pointed toward the entrance of a towering office building. The street-light overhead showed two men standing at the curb in conversation. "That's Ted in the gray suit," Vesey barked. "The big mug standin' next to him—is Reynolds!"

Dogra nodded curtly. Releasing the safety catch of the automatic, he poked its muzzle through the open window—

Crack! Crack! Crack!

The crashing reports of the automatic froze Willy to a chunk of ice. Dimly he saw the man in the gray suit break into a run and disappear around a corner. The tall, slim man spun dizzily in his tracks, clutched his stomach and pitched to the sidewalk.

"Scram!" Dogra ripped out the word. And as the car lurched forward in a fast pick-up, he tossed the smoking .38 to the street.

Vesey's hand darted up and flicked off Willy's hat. Dogra saw it leave the boy's head and made an awkward fumble to retrieve it. So awkward was he, that the hat flitted out the window and rolled against the curb.

Before Willy could speak, Dogra whirled on Vesey. "Close your window, you punk! The wind will blow out all our hats. Close it!"

Willy was so startled by the loss of his hat that he hadn't noticed that Dogra no longer held the automatic. Then Willy felt himself leave the seat and lurch into Vesey. Joe had jumped the curb to escape a traffic jam at the corner and was racing along the smooth sidewalk. Pedestrians scattered before the hurtling car like leaves before a storm. One man was not quick enough. He was later taken home, dead. On went the speeding death car. It took two more victims from the white collar army that works overtime to make ends meet. Lurching blindly around a corner the killer car disappeared down a side street.

Willy, heels dug into the floorboards to brace himself, tried to rub the horror picture from his mind. He felt a hand upon his arm. Twisting his head he looked into the stony, unemotional face of Dogra.

"Steady, boy," said the gang chief quietly. "Riding the sidewalk is all in a day's work. It was them or us."

"Yeah, yeah," came faintly from the lad's lips.

Vesey shoved his face in front of Willy's. "Say, kid, I thought ya wanted to be a mobster. Cripes! Ya got a yaller streak—"

Willy was keyed up to the breaking point. Not realizing what he was doing he lashed out at Vesey's face. The gangster took the boy's knotted fist squarely between the eyes and went to the floor with a crash. Snarling an oath he started up. But Dogra's patent leather shoe pinned him to the floorboards.

"Take it easy, you," warned the gang chief softly. "Maybe now you'll learn to keep out of my business. If the kid hadn't smacked you—I would have." Dogra took his foot off Vesey's chest. "Now get up here."

Vesey climbed into the seat, his dark eyes glittering with venom. But he wisely kept his mouth shut.

The reaction of the blow gave an outlet to Willy's pent-up emotions. He felt better for it. His thoughts began to take coherence again. He looked at Dogra.

"Who was that man? Did he die?"

Dogra's dull, fishy eyes bored straight into the boy's. "You know nothing about this—and no one died. Do you get me?"

WILLY nodded. Then he remembered his missing hat. "Say, Mister Dogra, my hat blew out the window. Will they find it and—"

"No, no," Dogra waved his hand in airy assurance. "That hat will blow a couple of blocks away. Not a thing to worry about, boy. But—" Dogra looked at Willy's bare head and drew out his wallet—"I'll gladly make good the loss to you." He caught a bill between his thumb and forefinger and pulled it halfway out, started to put it back, then finally handed it to the lad. "Here, buy yourself a new hat."

Willy took the crisp new bill. It was a twenty dollar note. He whistled. "Say, Mister Dogra, this would buy five hats for me. The one I lost was only three seventy-five. Gee, I can't take all this."

"Sure you can," chuckled Dogra. "It's nothing at all."

"That's mighty fine of you, Mister Dogra." And he pocketed the money.

Vesey sullenly watched the transaction. His venomous eyes narrowed to glowering slits as he saw the hat money disappear into Willy's pocket.

Dogra signalled to Joe. The car came to a stop at the curb. The gang chief turned to Willy. "There's a hat store on the next block. Drop in there and get yourself a real skypiece." Dogra paused a moment. "You know, boy, you better quit your job tomorrow. Give the boss a laugh. Tell him that a rich and beautiful girl is going to keep you. That will jolt him, eh?"

A grin spread over Willy's face. He could picture how the sour-faced head shipper would take that one. Then the grin left his face. "Say, Mister Dogra, suppose the cops do find my hat. What—"

"They won't," smiled the gangster. "But if it is turned in—remember that half the coppers in this town are in my pay." Dogra watched Willy climb out of the car. "Drop around at Pete's place tomorrow night. In the meantime—keep your mouth shut. See you tomorrow night."

And the car left the curb with a grating of gears. Dogra leaned back on the cushions with the air of a man who has completed a good day's work. He selected and lighted a cigar, totally ignoring the sullen Vesey.

"Joe," he called to the bull-necked driver, "you got that thing from the kid's room and planted it, eh? And you put those newspaper clippings and key in his room, eh?"

Joe nodded. "Without a hitch an—"

But his words were drowned in a chilling, creepy laugh that filled the interior of the car. Joe's fingers gripped the wheel till his knuckles showed white. Vesey huddled closer into his corner.

WALKING toward the hat store, Willy did a whole lot of thinking. That tall man clutching his stomach as he fell to the sidewalk was still vivid in his mind. And with nauseating clearness came the vision of

the home-bound workers being hurled from the bumper of the speeding car. They were all dead. No human body could survive that terrific impact. Four men killed in one night—and before his very eyes. Willy shuddered. He had not pictured this side of mob life. All that had registered on his mind was the ready money and the high life that went with it.

Then he thought of his job. Steven's department store wasn't the worst place in the world to work. That reminded him of what Dogra told him to tell his boss. Now out of the Italian gang chief's presence, he saw it in a different light. He spat disgustedly. And that gesture plainly bespoke his attitude toward any fellow who would let a girl keep him.

Willy did not even look in the window of the hat store. That twenty dollars with two-fifty added to it would buy him a suit. He needed a suit. For he was going back to his job in the morning, and keep it. That one automobile ride had shown him all the mob life he wanted to see.

Ten minutes later, with his mind fully made up, he turned a corner a block away from his rooming house. Just as he was about to cross the street, a stocky, broad-shouldered man stepped out of a doorway and called to him:

"Hey, Willy. Wait a minute."

The lad whirled about and recognized the newcomer. "Why, hello, Dan. What are you doing here?"

Dan Halleran stepped up and grasped the boy's arm. "Waiting for you, son. Come on, let's get away from here."

Willy held back. "What's the matter with going to my room?"

"Plenty," came back Halleran. "Come on, we're going for a subway ride."

Seated in a quiet little restaurant on the other side of town, Halleran looked thoughtfully at the puzzled lad.

"Well," the Irishman began, "you

certainly took my advice about Vesey, didn't you?"

Willy waved away the thought. "That's all over, Dan. I'm going back to my job tomorrow and like it. I'm through with the mob."

Halleran shook his head grimly. "No, you're not—and if something isn't done damn fast, you're going straight to the electric chair!"

"W-What—?"

"Shut up! And if you interrupt me once, I'm gonna sock you for the brainless puppy you are! Just sit tight and listen." Halleran took a deep breath. "You wouldn't know it, of course, but Dogra's classy moll, Lola Blaine, has been two-timing him for a rich swell named Milton Reynolds."

Willy's eyes went wide. "You mean that society fellow who's always in the papers?"

Up came Halleran's balled fist. "See this? Next time you butt in—you get it!" The Irishman scratched his chin. "Where was I? Oh, yeah. Reynolds, that's the bird all right. And Dogra wanted him bumped. But he knew the papers would kick up enough fuss to break him and his mob. Now all that Dogra needed was some dumb goat to take the rap for him. And that was you . . . The rap guy!"

Willy started up from his chair. "Then that tall man Dogra shot was—Milton Reynolds!" The lad sank back into his chair. Like a knockout punch came the stunning realization of the spot he was in. It was appalling, unbelievable. "Dan," he asked huskily, "are you sure—are you—?"

Halleran nodded grimly. "Yep, son. I found it out too late to help you. Now pull yourself together and tell me everything that happened. Every detail."

WHEN WILLY finished, Dan shook his head sadly. "Got your fingerprints on the rod, clip and all, huh? Then chucked your hat in with it. Damn his rotten soul!"

Very slowly Willy came to his feet. His eyes held a glint that no boy's

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eyes should hold. "His soul will be damned—tonight!"

Halleran leaped around the table, caught his arm. "Don't go off your head, Willy. You're in a tough spot. The cops'll never give you a break if they get their hands on you. They can't! The papers would ride every one of them out of their jobs. And keep away from Dogra. He'd shoot you down like a mad dog!"

Halleran flashed a quick look around the restaurant. It was empty save for a man cashier who was bent over a ledger in the front of the store. He turned back to Willy. "You've only got one out—and that's a million to one shot. You've gotta skip town, Willy. Get into Canada if you can. Lay low." Halleran clenched his fists. "It's a damn lousy deal, Willy. In less than two hours every cop—"

"I know," said Willy huskily. "Dogra bragged that half the cops were paid by him."

"That's just it!" pleaded Halleran. "Your life isn't worth a plugged nickel here. Your only chance is to skip the country. Here's all the jack I have—"

Willy jerked out the twenty dollar bill that Dogra gave him and flung it on the table. "The dirty mutt gave me that . . . You keep it. I won't need money where I'm going—neither will Dogra!" With that he brushed past Halleran and made for the door.

"You crazy fool, take this money!" Halleran snatched up the twenty note and added it to his own wad of bills. Then the Irishman gave vent to a terrible oath. Again he looked at the money that was to make a slinking fugitive of an innocent young boy. Like a flash of light he started after the headstrong lad.

"Willy!" he yelled. "Come here, you idiot! I've got the one thing that—"

Willy swung about with clenched fists. Unreasoning anger clouded his mind like a red mist. And in that mist he saw Dan Halleran as the one thing standing between him and his venge-

ance on the double-crossing Dogra. Willy's right fist started at the knee and two years' muscle-work on a heavy delivery truck sped it like a sledge to Halleran's chin. The Irishman was out cold on his feet before he knew what struck him. A sob choked Willy's throat as he saw his best friend drop to the floor. Hot, salty tears dimmed his eyes. Like a man deprived of his reason, he tore out of the restaurant.

THE guard stationed at the door of Dogra's hideout made a frantic movement to reach his gun. But the slim leaping figure of a boy lunged against him before his hand touched his pocket. Rage-driven fists cut his face to a bloody pulp. A bony fist in his solar plexis doubled him to the vestibule floor.

Scarcely looking at the fallen gangster, Willy bounded up the stairs to Dogra's office. He flung open the door. Dogra, Vesey and Joe were in the office. Willy was in too much of a rage to appreciate the fact that he was the only living man to catch a look of surprise on Mike Dogra's face. Like a maddened bull, he charged across the room.

The heavy-set Joe sprang forward and caught the boy in his powerful arms. And for all his kicking and struggling, Willy could not budge those steel bands circling him. Finally he subsided and panting like a spent horse, glared his hate at the gang leader.

Dogra was again his stony, imperious self. His dead fish eyes were fixed on Willy. "Who's this young fellow?" he asked his two lieutenants.

But Vesey was either not quick enough to follow Dogra's cue, or couldn't resist the impulse to gloat. He swaggered in front of the imprisoned boy. "Well, Willy Moore, ya damn punk—how does it feel to know yer so dumb—"

Dogra's pointed toe jabbing into Vesey's shin-bone cut short the gangster's tirade. With a howl of surprise,

Vesey hopped around on his good foot. He sank into a chair, his pimply face twisted in pain. In his eyes was a venomous gleam of almost maniacal intensity.

"You know, Vesey," said Dogra softly, "I'm coming to the conclusion that the only way to keep your mouth shut—is to stick a gun into it. The next time—I'll do it." Then the gang chief looked calmly at Joe.

"Do you know this fellow, Joe?" he asked.

Joe shook his head seriously. "Never seen him, boss."

"Then we better throw him into the street," suggested Dogra, reaching for a cigar.

Willy almost choked in his fury. "I'll get you, Dogra—you dirty, lousy—"

Clapping his big hand over the boy's mouth, Joe carried him to the head of the stairs.

Dogra got his cigar going. "Is the strange young man leaving us, Joe?"

"An' how!" grinned the bull-necked gangster. With a shove he hurled Willy down the flight of stairs.

Bruised, bleeding, stunned almost into unconsciousness, Willy stumbled over the prone figure of the gangster he had downed. Teeth clenched Willy crawled to his feet to again start up the stairs. But Joe and Dogra were coming down. Joe thrust out his open hand and knocked Willy reeling onto the sidewalk. The boy went flat on the broken cement pavement. He gamely struggled to his hands and knees, trying to shake the grogginess out of his throbbing head.

Dogra paused in the doorway and quickly glanced up and down the dimly-lighted street. A taxi parked several yards away brought a thin smile to his taut lips. Stepping onto the sidewalk, he raised his voice to the dazed boy.

"Keep out of here, you gutter rat. Next time you try to frame a murder charge on me—you'll get hurt." Dogra brushed his hands as if he had thrown the lad out. Turning on his

heel he entered the doorway. Just inside he whirled around and stood against the wall. With a jerk of his thumb he motioned Joe to carry the fallen gangster upstairs. When the door upstairs shut, Dogra crouched in the darkness and watched the sidewalk with those dead-cold eyes of his.

WILLY felt strong arms lift him to his feet. The first thought that penetrated his dazed brain was that Joe was going to strong-arm him some more. Willy tensed his muscles for a roundhouse swing to his tormentor's jaw. But his flexing muscles telegraphed the blow to the man behind him. Before the punch got underway, Willy felt his arms pinned helplessly to his sides. A gruff voice spoke in his ear:

"Take it easy, young feller, you'll last longer."

Willy twisted his head around and saw part of the visored cap usually worn by metropolitan taxi drivers. Beneath it were a pair of steady blue eyes.

"Why, why, who are you?" he asked thickly.

The chauffeur released his grip, turning the boy around. He nodded toward the parked taxi several yards down the street. "There's a lady in my cab wants to see you."

The taxi door swung open and Willy saw a beautiful blonde girl step onto the running-board. Yes, even at that distance, he could tell that she was beautiful. She beckoned to him with a wave of her hand.

Willy started. Somewhere, some place he had seen that girl. But his still groggy mind failed to show the connection. When she stepped out of the taxi, he knew he must have been dreaming. No girl he knew owned a scarlet evening gown and spangled wrap. The blonde beckoned again.

With a shrug Willy limped toward the waiting girl. The taxi driver went on ahead and slid under the wheel. As Willy neared the cab the blonde

stepped forward and impulsively grasped his arm.

"Hurry up, kid," she pleaded anxiously.

Willy held back. "You're making a mistake—"

"No, I'm not," she all but pushed him into the cab.

Willy had no sooner touched the seat when the driver was off like a shot from a gun. The lad silently looked at the blonde and found her dark eyes studying him. She was beautiful in an artificial way. Her eyebrows were thin, arched lines. Her eyelashes were caked with a dark cosmetic. And the glistening rouge on her lips could be scraped off with a shovel. An exotic perfume came from her person as if it had been squirted on with a hose. Willy drew a deep breath. This was the kind of a girl he had associated with mob high life. But after the night's harrowing experiences, she held no charms for him.

"Well," he asked, "what's it all about?"

She crossed her legs, generously displaying silken knees.

Willy looked at them, then grunted. "Pull down the shades, blondie. No soap."

A tinkle of laughter greeted this. The girl drew the spangled wrap over her legs. She pursed her lips. "I'll tell you what it's all about, Mister Fresh Guy. I was sap enough to feel sorry for you when you took that nose dive onto the sidewalk. That's all."

She touched her breast with an absurdly red fingernail. "I'm—Lola."

"Thanks," Willy murmured apologetically. "I'm feeling all right now and I better be getting out. I have to see somebody."

The blonde leaned closer. Her wavy, perfumed hair brushed his face. "Maybe Mike Dogra?" she whispered.

Willy straightened in the seat. His jaw squared. "What do you know about him?"

THE boy's eyes narrowed. "I got you now. You're the moll that two-timed—"

Lola's soft hand pushed the rest of the sentence back into his teeth with a resounding slap. The driver twisted around to see what was the matter. Lola saw him turning and slid her arms around Willy's neck. Moving closer she kissed him full on the mouth. The driver turned back to his task with a big sigh. "Whata smack," he told himself. "Some birds get all the breaks."

Then Lola laid her soft cheek against Willy's, her lips close to his ear. "Keep your trap shut—you dumbbell!" she whispered cuttingly.

Willy pushed her away and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Looking at his hand, he in turn wiped it on the leather seat of the cab. "Lay off," he muttered under his breath.

Lola smiled. "Then keep still till we get to my apartment. I want you to tell me about—" she lowered her voice—"the framed murder charge that Dogra was yelling about. Maybe I can help you."

Willy's heart filled with hope. What luck! Perhaps this girl could help him fight the iron-clad evidence that hemmed him in on all sides. Perhaps with her help he could beat the damning fingerprints on the death gun. What luck! Willy's thoughts raced at express train speed. Perhaps—

The cab swerved into the curb and drew up before a pretentious apartment house. Lola paid the driver and they entered the iron-grilled doors. A colored boy took them up in the elevator to the seventh floor. At apartment 7-D, Lola inserted a key in the lock and went in. Snapping on the lights, she threw her evening wrap over a chair.

Willy was dazzled by the luxuriously furnished room. Compared to his dingy little sleeping cubby hole, it was a queen's palace. And he was no less dazzled by Lola's dangerously low-cut, backless gown. Her voice cut in on his reverie:

"Have a drink, kid?"

Willy shook his head. "Don't touch it, thanks."

She shrugged and poured a stiff ball of whisky from a cut-glass decanter. Downing the drink in one gulp, she picked up a cigarette box. "Smoke?"

Willy took a long blue and gold cigarette and immediately wished he hadn't. She ignited a modernistic lighter, got her cigarette going, then held it to Willy's.

"Sit down, kid," she indicated a divan. Willy sat down and she nestled in the cushions a scant foot from him. For some moments she studied him with dark, brooding eyes. Then, "Tell me what Mike Dogra meant when he said you were framing him."

Willy laid the perfumed cigarette on an ash try, glad for the chance to get rid of it. "That was just a gag. He is the one who killed your swell boy friend."

OLA'S eyes became as hard as ice. "I know he did—the filthy murderer. And I liked that boy more than anyone I've ever met." She opened her handbag and showed Willy the butt of a snub-nosed automatic. "I was outside Mike's place just about to go in and kill him—when I saw you come tumbling out. Then I thought we might be able to help each other—and send him to the chair! But tell me, how do you know he killed Milton?"

Willy leaned forward, jaw squared. "I saw him do it!"

"What?" she almost screeched the word. Impulsively grasping both of Willy's wrists, she pulled him close to her. "Kid," she said hoarsely, "have you got the guts to tell that on a witness stand?"

Her fiercely glowing eyes held Willy fascinated. Then the full import of her words struck him like a thunderbolt of doom. Her asking him to testify in court was impossible. The instant the police laid their hands on

him he was as good as burned. He hastily rose from the divan.

"Gee, Miss, if you can't help me any more than that, I better be going fast."

Lola sat bolt upright. "What do you mean, *me* help you?"

"Gee, Miss, you said in the cab that you might be able to help me."

The girl jumped to her feet. "Don't be a sap. I want to get **Mike Dogra**—that's all that matters." Then she smiled and went around the divan. Laying her hands on Willy's shoulders, she pressed herself close to him. "I should think you would *want* to please me."

Willy freed himself of her embrace. "Gee, Miss, you don't understand. I can't go anywhere near a court."

And he told her how Dogra got his fingerprints on the gun, and of his hat being thrown from the car.

For a full minute Lola stood braced as if warding off a physical blow. "Then," she cried huskily, "Mike knew I was in that taxi! He wanted me to pick you up and bring you here. He wanted us to be found together. I see it now. Oh, he's a devil! A filthy devil!"

Without the slightest warning she flew at Willy, pushing him toward the door. "Get out, you fool! They'll find us here and accuse us both of killing Milton. They'll say I had you kill him. Get out! Get out!"

Suddenly the door of the apartment was flung open and three men loomed on the threshold. The foremost, a thick-set fellow with a straggly black mustache, held a revolver in his hand.

"Quiet down!" he ordered gruffly. "Nobody's gettin' outa here." He flashed a badge and indicated the man beside him. "We're from headquarters."

WILLY crouched in the center of the room like an animal at bay. Even as he judged the distance to the next room, he knew that the gun in the man's hand would bring him down before he could take two steps. Then

Willy tensed, his fingers bunching into fists—

The third man stepped around the detective and came into the room, closing the door. It was Mike Dogra!

Immaculate in starched linen and tuxedo, the gang chief leaned back on his silver-topped cane. He smelled the fragile gardenia in his lapel, then smiled at the bewildered girl.

"Hello, Lola dear," his tone was soft and purring. "I met these two men in the elevator. It—er—seems we were both calling on you—dear." Looking at Willy, Dogra pointed his stick. "And who is this strange young man?"

Lola's crafty brain was working swiftly. She rushed up to the first detective. "Oh, I'm so glad you came. This person—" she indicated Willy with a well-feigned look of fright—"he broke in my apartment to rob me! I was telling him to get out just as you came in. Oh, I'm so glad you're here."

A hurt look came into Willy's eyes.

"Ho, ho!" guffawed Martin, the big detective. "So you're turning on your boy friend now, tryin' to save your own skin?"

Lola's rouged lips curled contemptuously. "Boy friend? How the hell do you get that way? He's a thief in my home. I demand that you arrest him!"

Martin, still holding his gun on Willy, drew a pair of handcuffs with his left hand. "He'll get arrested all right—for the murder of Milton Reynolds!"

Willy saw the handcuffs and a wave of just fury swept over him. He shook his fist at the gang chief. "You killed that man tonight, Dogra. I saw you do it! You can't get away with this. I'll tell the jury everything!"

Martin snapped the handcuffs on the boy and sheathed his gun. Looking over his shoulder, he half grinned. "Of course, you have an alibi, Mister Dogra?"

Dogra looked up from smelling his gardenia. "Of course."

Martin gave a satisfied nod. Again he turned to the handcuffed boy. "Now we'll take you down to the station house and check them fingerprints on the gun." He snapped his fingers as if remembering something. "And the captain has a nice hat he wants to try on you."

Lola laughed lightly. "And you can book him on an attempted burglary charge, too."

The big detective jerked his thumb toward her evening wrap on the chair. "You come along, too, sister."

Lola took a startled step backwards. "You've got nothing on me, you flat-footed bum!"

That pet name was Martin's sore spot. He grabbed the girl roughly, his thick fingers sinking into her soft white arm. "Lay off them names, you little twist. We've got you good." Martin motioned for his aide to take charge of Willy. Then with a great flourish he took a package of newspaper clippings and a brass key from his pocket. "See these?" he waved the articles under the girl's nose. "We found 'em in the kid's room after tracin' his hat. Let's see now, here's a flock of press notices about the last show you were in. Hmmm. You don't look so bad wearin' a string of beads and a smile. Nope, not at all. Can't blame the kid's taste nohow." Then he held up the key. "And this little trinket just opened your door for us." Martin replaced the evidence in his pocket. "Naw—you never saw him before, did you, sister? Ho, ho!"

Lola was fit to be tied. Her eyes fairly blazed. "It's a dirty frame-up!" she yelled. "Y o u, Dogra — you damn—"

"Shut up!" Martin raised his beefy hand as if to clout her in the mouth. Lola shrank back, eyes flaming red hatred.

WILLY felt his knees grow weak. The steel trap of blind justice was closing in a death clamp. He knew those clippings and key were planted in his room, but he was too

dazed to even deny his connection with them.

Martin scratched his chin. "Say," he mused aloud, "I'd like to strengthen this love nest of the dame and the kid. The papers will eat it up. There oughta be somethin' here of his." He turned to Jenkins, his aide, "Say, Jenk, take a look around this dump."

Jenkins had his reply all ready. Seemed like he was waiting for Martin's cue to speak his lines. "Sure thing, sarge, I'll snoop around." And without the slightest hesitation, Jenkins made a bee-line for the bedroom.

Two minutes later he reappeared brandishing a skin cigarette case with initials burned on it. The sort of a souvenir you would pick up at Coney Island. He stuck it under Willy's nose. "This yours?" he growled.

Willy's eyes went wide open. There in the detective's hand was his own cigarette case. On the brown skin were burned initials—W. M.

This was the last straw. Willy knocked the cigarette case out of the detective's hand. "You were right, Dogra!" he cried bitterly. "You have the lousy cops in your pay. You have the yellow mutts crawling—"

Martin's big hand closed around the lad's throat, cutting off his wind. "Mister Dogra," grinned the detective, "maybe this fresh kid could trip as he got off the elevator. An accident, you know. Fall right on his face." With that the big detective drew back his ham-like fist.

"I wouldn't do that, Martin!"

The crisp voice came from the direction of the door. Martin, Jenkins and Dogra whirled in their tracks. There in the doorway stood Dan Halleran with a .45 automatic in his hand. Behind him were two smooth-shaven young men. Each of them held a glittering blue-black automatic.

DOGRA'S face twisted in rage. "Halleran!" he snarled. "What the hell do you mean—"

Wham!

The stocky Irishman's fist crashed into Dogra's snarling face, shredding his lips and breaking off two front teeth. Halleran followed up with a shove that sent the gangster sprawling on the floor.

"How do you like that, Dogra? Maybe it'll teach you not to let a yellow flatfoot make a pass at a kid!" Dogra started to get up. Halleran drew back his fist. "You sit right there on the floor."

Halleran bent over and frisked him. "No rod. Playing safe, eh? Now sit there, or I'll crown you."

"Dan!" and Willy found tears came from that name.

The Irishman's teeth gleamed in a smile. "Hi, Willy. Be with you soon as I draw the fangs from these brave coppers."

Martin and Jenkins stood cowed under the steady automatics of Halleran's two companions. Martin was the first to find his tongue. "See here, Halleran, this is pretty high play for a gangster. I'll send you up for life, so help me—"

Halleran thrust his face within an inch of the blustering detective's. "You'll help yourself to a broken nose, if you don't shut up."

Martin backed away several steps. His guts turned to water when a man faced him. Halleran took Martin's gun and dropped it into his coat pocket. Next he took Jenkins'.

"And you," the Irishman confronted Jenkins, "you're the smart dick who found the cigarette case, huh?" With a snort of disgust, he cuffed Jenkins back against the wall.

Taking a key from Martin's pocket, he unlocked Willy's handcuffs.

"Gee, Dan," Willy grabbed his friend's hand, "I'm glad to see you."

"Me, too, Willy. I'd have been here sooner—" Halleran made a wry face and rubbed his chin,—"but that sock you handed me was sure a hummer. That's all right, son. I understand how you felt. Forget it."

Halleran felt a soft arm entwine his own. He cocked his head to one

side. "Oh, it's you, huh?" he grunted.

"Me and you—all the time, Dan," murmured Lola snuggling closer. "You sure got me out of a tough spot."

Taking her wrist, Halleran lifted her arm from his and dropped it by her side. "Now just a minute, Scatterbrain. If I remember correctly I heard all your little speech through the door. Oh, yeah. You're the pure, sweet flower who turned on the kid when he needed a pal most. Aw—go sit down before I forget I'm a gentleman!"

Lola sat down—fast.

away. And if you hadn't been so phoney through and through, you'd have given the kid a good twenty dollar bill to buy his new hat with. Yep, Mike, I spotted that counterfeit bill the minute Willy threw it on the table to me. Sure was a bonehead play on your part, Mike."

Martin straightened up. "Then you're a federal dick, eh?"

"Right the first time, big boy. Meet Daniel Halleran, United States Secret Service. These two lads are my buddies. Shake hands all around."

"Well," blustered Martin, "as a police officer I've got my rights—"



Halleran rubbed his hands together, smiling at Dogra who looked ridiculously funny sitting on the floor. "Well, Mike, you sure pulled a lot of phoney tricks on the kid, didn't you? Every play you made was phoney. Yeah, *every one!*"

All the occupants of the room were watching Dogra with a strange fascination. There was actually a light in those dull, dead-cod eyes of his. And that light was fear! His face turned from its chalky white to a dirty yellow. His bleeding, shredded lips parted:

"Y-You're—a—"

"Yep," Halleran cut in. "I can see you get what I'm driving at right

Halleran looked at him. "You'll get my good right fist in the middle of your face if you don't pipe down."

Martin piped down.

"It was a long trail, Mike," continued Halleran, "but Uncle Sam doesn't rush things. He can wait ten or twenty years to get the man he wants and go all over the world to do it. You can't put anything over on ole Sammy. I've been wise to you for some time but could never catch you. Well, it's all over but the shouting, Mike."

DOGRa leaned forward, his face a horrible bloody mask. "No, you're wrong, Halleran. It's not all

over. I've got that kid and girl sewed up tight. They'll burn sure as hell. Now wait a minute, Halleran, you're a brainy guy. Forget this phoney bill—and I'll fix it up with the police so's the kid will get off."

Halleran laughed right out loud. "The only thing you can get is a headache. Now let me tell you something: Willy isn't going to be turned over to the police for a long, long time. Why? Because he's Uncle Sam's star witness in a counterfeiting case. The United States Government comes first, last and in the middle. It's bigger than all crooked coppers and judges on your payroll.

"Now get this straight because you're not gonna have a lot of time to think it over. In the first place when Willy testifies how and where he got that counterfeit bill, it will place you in the death car that killed Milton Reynolds. Oh, almost forgot, Mike. You shouldn't have kicked Vesey around so much. He's down at the U. S. District Headquarters talking so fast the clerks are running out of pencils. And Joe, too. He was weakening fast when I left there. He'll tell plenty before Uncle Sam gets through with him.

"So you see, Mike, when we get through with the counterfeiting case, the federal records will have you placed in the death car. Those records go on file down at Washington. Nobody questions them. So—" Halleran took a deep breath,—"Uncle Sam will then turn you over to the district attorney to go on trial for the murder of Milton Reynolds. And with you will go those federal court records that prove beyond the slightest doubt that you were in the death car that did four murders in one night. And those records will embody the testimony of both Vesey and Joe of the

facts that led up to you passing Willy the counterfeit bill." Halleran put his hands on his hips and glared at the gangster. "Now squirm out of that, you rotten mutt!"

Lola left her chair with a little cry. "I'm turning government witness, Dan. I know a lot about those counterfeit bills. I passed them among Milton's friends—Mike made me do it."

Halleran looked at her with undisguised contempt. "Ready to turn up somebody else now to save your skin, huh? Well, get something on and come along. I guess if I have to stand riding with Dogra, I can stand you, too."

Martin and Jenkins started toward the door. Martin chuckled. "Sorry to go, Halleran, but you and your Uncle Sam have nothing on me."

"Right you are, big boy, but the district attorney and his stenographer have been in the hall for the last hour. Maybe he'll want to have a friendly little talk with you." Halleran raised his voice. "Oh, Mister District Attorney, you can borrow my two boys to take these punk coppers to your office, if you want to."

The D. A. did. And the way the two secret service men hustled Martin and Jenkins out of the room showed they didn't mind helping at all.

Willy grabbed Dan's hand and wrung it as only a man can who has just stepped from the shadow of the electric chair. His throat was too choked to talk, but his handshake said a man-sized mouthful.

"It's all right, Willy," smiled Dan. "When this is all over, I'll get you another job and all will be jake again. But right now I want you to keep an eye on Flaming Mamie while I help Mike here get up."

And Halleran's shoe gently assisted Mike Dogra to his feet.





DUKE MORGAN

You can take everything from a man—but his little superstitions. Those curious quirks of mind stay with a person until the grave claims them. So it was with Duke Morgan, the city gunman. He took a whirl at mixing murder with superstition.

ARVILLE is a forgotten village in the winter. The crackling whip of the wind lashes furiously across its bare sands. Mist blows in from the ocean with constant regularity, cloaking the barren wastes.

Queer old sea dogs with leathery faces hardened by the strong sea air hang on in this desolateness throughout the cold months. They are a quiet lot, law-abiding and fearless. During the summer, when the ocean is a cool respite, thousands of city dwellers flock to Arville. The old sea dogs perhaps resent this inundation of chattering people, but they say nothing. It is expected.

Yet let one of the city dwellers show his pale face during the dead of winter! The old sea dogs notice it with quizzical countenance. Especially if the city dweller's features are wizened, and his lips are thin, bloodless and cruel like those of Duke Morgan, the cannon.

For two weeks now, Duke had been seen around Arville, his flashy clothes

Cocktails for the Corpse

By Ronald Flagg



CRANFIELD

a noticeable contrast to the home-spuns of the sea dogs. It had been rumored around the village that Duke was in hiding until some mess he had perpetrated in the city blew over.

There was a general feeling among the inhabitants that Constable Cranfield should run the Duke out of the village. But the officer of the law knew that he couldn't do that without reason, no matter how the people clamored.

The county sheriff had heard the murmurings of the people, and he too was riding Cranfield "to do something —get that rat out of town."

Cranfield felt a chill go through him now as he walked across the ramplike streets headed for the lonely shack occupied by Duke Morgan. His only object for being in the vicinity was to see if he could possibly get something on the Duke that would give him a chance to exercise his authority and pitch the parasitic racketeer out of town.

He moved away from the boarded ramps and cut across the wind-swept beach. In the gray murk he could see the lonely shack that housed the man called Duke Morgan.

Before it lay a tempestuous sea, raging and swelling high preparatory to flood-tide which would be mounting inwardly as soon as night set in.

Cranfield's sharp eyes swept the angry waters as they seethed and tumbled with immeasurable strength. The fascinating sight held him entranced as it had many times before. A spark of emotion flickered in his eyes. These waters had been his playground ever since he was a kid. In the years since his childhood, he had come to develop that peculiar love for the sea.

These waters, fearful as they seemed, were an open book to him. Close relationship had yielded many secrets to him.

Suddenly he was shaken out of his moment of reverie. At the edge of the shore, knee-deep in the swirling waters, loomed the figure of a man.

Indistinct as the picture was, Cranfield nevertheless saw the figure hurl something into the waters.

The officer stood still in his tracks, focussing intently on the dark figure. He saw the figure's arms fling upward; then he saw outlined against the crest of a wave a limp bundle.

The water seemed to throw it back to the shore; then the running backwash sucked it back. In a moment the thundering seas had pulled the object backward into its depths and blackness.

Cranfield ran across the sand. Something within him made his pulse

quicken. He thought he had seen a body thrown into those turbulent waters.

The thunder of the sea was strong now as he came to the edge of the shore. Spray smacked his face, stinging it like ice.

The figure that had been struggling knee-deep in the surf had ploughed back to the hard sand. He stood there unperturbed, defiant, water dripping from his trouser legs.

It was Duke Morgan.

"What the hell do you want?" he snarled. "You ten-cent-a-dozen dick."

Cranfield's jaws clamped hard. The constable whipped his glance to the sea. Nothing but the beating waves was visible. He turned to Duke.

"What did you throw into the sea just now?"

DUKE'S mocking laughter rose high above the pound of the water. When he finished, he spat: "Garbage, brother, garbage!"

With that he wheeled around and began trekking back to his shack. But the officer grabbed him by the arm and whirled him around hard.

"The hell you did. I saw you—"

Duke's face twisted evilly. The cruel smirk that had made him a feared piece of humanity clouded his face. The thin lips curled upward wolfishly.

In the darkness his eyes held that strange, menacing fire of the tiger.

"Listen," he snarled. "Some of these days you're going to wake up and find yourself holding a lily in your hand, get me? You scram outta here quick. I'm entitled to my rights as a citizen, ain't I? I threw a load of garbage in the sea instead of letting it hang around the beach. That's civic pride, mister."

Cranfield's blood boiled. The arrogance of the man had long since irked him beyond endurance. Yet he too realized there was little he could do. Nevertheless he voiced his suspicions.

"Duke Morgan, I saw you throw a body into the sea!"

The accusation rang forth sharply but the Duke's echo of mocking laughter was just as strong.

"Yeah?" he laughed. "Ain't that funny. Now yer accusin' me of murder, eh? Cripes, flatfoot, yer wasting yer time in this burg with that sense of humor." He began walking away. Over his shoulder he yelled: "Murder, eh? Well mebbe you can figure out the motive, if any. An' when you get through with that you might try to produce the body, if any."

The small office of the constable was crowded when he got back. A bit amazed, he hurried through the dark street and entered the place.

Quickly he caught the tense feeling of the crowd. The county sheriff was seated at the big roll top desk.

His manner was far from friendly as Cranfield came in, slightly bewildered.

"My God, man where've you been?" the sheriff thundered. "Have I got to come down from Clinton to take over your district when something happens?"

Cranfield looked about sheepishly. Things had been going terribly rotten for the last two weeks. It seemed that ever since Duke Morgan hit town, the constable had been taking a lacing from the people of the village and the county sheriff.

"What's happened? Anything serious?"

The sheriff bounced to his feet. He slammed his massive hand on the desk.

"Serious, you say. Serious as hell. Our most revered public servant, Thompson Richardson, has been murdered right here in his own town of Arville."

For a moment Cranfield found no words to utter, so profound was the shock of the announcement.

"Murdered—here—"

"We suspect murder," the sheriff said. "His car was found on Seacrest Road. Fresh bloodspots were in the driver's seat. That looks like murder, doesn't it?"

One of the townsmen stepped forward.

"Cranfield," he muttered. "You will stand on what you can do to solve this case. We have asked you to rid the town of this Duke Morgan. To date you have failed to do this. Now the man who had led us in this movement is missing. We personally know that he had no enemies, and it is logical for us to suspect that this Duke Morgan had something to do with Richardson's demise. It is up to you to bring forth justice. Good night!"

The speaker left the room, followed by the rest of the townsmen.

The sheriff and the constable were left alone.

"Where have you been?" the sheriff asked.

Cranfield told him he had been spying on the Duke, but withheld the incident that had occurred by the water's edge.

Then for a moment the sheriff dropped his official pose and hardness.

"You've got a tough case here, kid. The townspeople loved Richardson. And we know how he hated gunmen like Morgan. He tried to run Morgan out of town. There may be a connection between the two—but consider: the motive is purely conjecture. That much is permissible. But what about the body? Where is it? Even if we could hang this on the Duke, it wouldn't mean a thing unless we could produce the *corpus delicti*.

"I don't think you can do anything about it, but you'd better work damn hard. Because I don't want to be forced to get a new constable."

Cranfield did not respond. Through his mind were rushing the peculiar events that he had witnessed by the sea. He barely heard the sheriff's "good night" so deeply was he engrossed in the picture in his mind. He saw once again the turbulent black sea; the indistinct shape being sucked away by the rushing waters. He could visualize the exact spot where the entire incident had occurred. And as he

did a surge of excitement pulsed through him.

That spot where the Duke had waded knee-deep lurked in his memory. It swung the pendulum of time backward to his boyhood when he had first stood on the exact spot, playing and learning then the secrets of this powerful thing called the sea.

Hope burned in his eyes as he left the office and walked toward the desolate shore.

THE lonely shack occupied by Duke Morgan lay like a hulk rejected by the sea. To this Cranfield came, every nerve in his body tense.

He stood on the wooden threshold and rapped on the door. Behind him lashed the sea, making a mournful dirge. The wind shrieked eerily to the accompaniment of the breakers, while overhead the moon was blotted by black clouds.

Twice he rapped before the Duke came to the door. His manner was belligerent at sight of the constable.

But Cranfield had his foot propped against the door so Morgan could not slam it in his face. Expertly and firmly he wiggled his way into the smelly room. It reeked with the odor of liquor. On the table lay two bottles of whiskey.

"Now what the hell do yer want?" Duke yelled. His eyes were red-rimmed from too much drinking, and he reeled slightly as he sat down at the table.

"I ain't receivin' callers, I told yer before. Me health's bad and I need a rest. What do yer want?"

"Not much," Cranfield responded. "Just came down to tell you that Richardson's been murdered!"

The city cannon jerked his drunken head upward. A sly look crossed his wizened face.

"So what?"

"Nothing. I thought you'd like to know."

"Ain't that cute. So that's what you ten-cent dicks do when some one gets bumped off, eh? You make personal

rounds of the neighbors and announce the fact, eh?"

He laughed loudly, arrogantly. "You fellers 're a scream."

He poured himself a drink and washed it down with one expert swing of his arm.

"Well, thanks for the news. Now scram."

Cranfield looked at him hard, searchingly, accusingly.

The expression in his face was evident even to the half-drunken Morgan.

He laughed. "Go ahead," he taunted. "Say it. Say that you think I did it. You stupid squirt, where's the body?"

Cranfield rushed forward. His jaw jutted forward hard. Both his hands were resting on the table. His body bent forward accusingly.

"Who said anything about the body?" he barked. "I only told you that Richardson had been murdered."

The gunman, in spite of his drunken stupor, did not lose his keenness. He had been cross-examined too many times.

"Well, what you getting your ears in an uproar for? I merely asked you where the body was. Mebbe I'd like to take a look at the guy's mug."

He snickered. "Now get outta here before I throw you out. If you think you got anything on me, you know the procedure. Get a court order."

Cranfield walked out of the shack. Slowly he trekked across the beach, a dejected figure. The pose was for Duke's benefit in case he was looking. Inwardly Cranfield knew the warmth of hope.

THREE a.m. by the lip of the sea in the winter can be desolate. At Arville it is worse than that: the ocean seems to exude that unexplainable beat of mystery with each swish of its waves. The wind creeps along the white-capped surface catching the monotonous surge of the water. Afar off black night meets black sea. The

white sands lay before this mass like bleached bones.

Cranfield hugged close to the shore as he came back for the third time that night to the spot where he had seen Duke knee-deep in the water.

First he wanted to test his knowledge. He stood at the exact spot where Duke had said he threw a bundle of garbage.

It was only extreme familiarity with the beach that aided Cranfield now. There were no identifying marks on the sand, for the sweep of the water had washed away every footprint.

With this much to refresh his mind, he made his way to the darkened shack. His purpose was to force an entry, search the Duke's room for the possibility of either a gun or a knife that might have been used in the alleged murder. At this hour he figured the Duke to be deeply insensible in a drunken stupor.

The back door of the shack gave easily to his prying. The sea-eaten lock fell back without effort and Cranfield pushed himself softly into the shack.

The place reeked with the odor of whiskey. As he paused he heard the heavy breathing of Duke Morgan.

Darkness filled every nook and cranny of the one-room shack. For several moments the officer remained motionless until he could refocus his eyes to the clinging darkness of the room.

He got to his knees and crawled along the left wall. Every inch of space met the searching feel of his hands. Then with painful approach he finally came to the dirty couch upon which slumbered the gunman whom Richardson had tried to run out of town.

Cranfield knew that if the lethal weapon was anywhere this was the place for it.

His hand started upward for the pillow. With extreme caution he made it move until his fingers were under-

neath the headrest. Duke was sprawled face toward the wall so that little of his head remained on the pillow.

Cranfield's fingers struck something hard. Slowly the fingers pressed on the hard object. They relayed their sensation to the officer's brain. A revolver.

But it was wrapped in a piece of cloth.

Cranfield's mind worked fast. He recalled that Duke was a pretty superstitious fellow. He believed in the queerest things. Here seemed proof of it, the revolver wrapped in a piece of cloth and put under the pillow was supposed to make a murderer immune to the forces of law and order. The officer also recalled that earlier that night when he had first come to the shack, there were two bottles of whiskey on the table. That was another criminal superstition. Whenever a guy bumped off some one else, he must have a bottle on the table for the deceased—

Duke snored loudly and moved. Cranfield pulled back his hand.

His movement was quick enough but the flash of his hand arcing through the air was seen by the half-open eyes of the cannon.

He leaped out of bed. With lightninglike motion he had grabbed the revolver under the pillow, thrown off its cloth holster and was brandishing it in the dark.

Cranfield had jumped to his feet, but the Duke's awakening had been so swift a thing, he had been unable to draw his own weapon.

Grimly both men faced each other.

The officer broke the silence first. He was going to bluff his way.

"One shell missing in that gat of yours, Duke. How come?"

There was a loud explosion. A red tongue of flame, angry and fearful, shattered the silence.

The acrid smell of gunpowder swirled in the close atmosphere.

Somewhere in the floor lodged the bullet.

"Now there's two missing, you little squirt, what you gonna do about that, eh? An' I've got a mind to make it three missing by puttin' one where it'll do the most good, only by this time I'm beginning to get a big kick out of you as a murder sleuth. Regular detective hero, aincha? So you find a bullet missing in my gat, eh? So what the hell does that prove? Got a body to go with it?"

His tone of voice was derisive.

Cranfield left the shack with the mocking laughter of the gunman ringing in his ears.

A STRANGE gathering huddled by the shore the following night. There were leathery-faced sea dogs, villagers, the county sheriff and Cranfield. In the officer's eyes there was excitement. In the eyes of the others lurked unmistakable signs of distrust.

The wind blew strong tonight. The sea raged, sending huge swells pounding landwardly. It was the beginning of flood tide, the sight of which is awing under normal circumstances. Tonight it was terrifying in its power for there was a full moon, though dark clouds shut off its light.

The sheriff had motioned Crandall away from the gathering.

"This is madness," he said. "You have got us all down here on a wild dream. Where in thunder do you expect to produce the body? Do you suppose you can say 'hocus-pocus' and bring it forth? I tell you, Cranfield, this is going to cook your goose unless—"

Cranfield's face was hard.

The crowd grew restless. They were standing about a hundred feet from the spot where Cranfield had spied Duke throwing something into the sea.

Duke Morgan himself came down the beach to the gathering. He searched for Cranfield.

"Yer sent fer me. What do yer want?"

"I've got the motive. I've seen the lethal weapon. And now I'm going to produce the *corpus delicti*," Cranfield told him, a strained nervousness tinging his voice. "I thought you might want to be in on it."

The man scoffed. "A fine cop you guys have. He bulldozes you in pulling a Barnum like this—and from the looks of it yer are falling hook, line and sinker. Well, come on, the act is on. Produce the corpus."

It sounded grisly, this queer humor of the city dweller with his pasty complexion.

There was no answer to his words. Cranfield was looking outward to the sea. Slowly all faces peered the same way and talking ceased.

C RANFIELD'S body was arched forward. His eyes were focussed hard ahead. There was little dalliance in his stance. It was straight ahead. Like the true mariner his course had been charted long ago. Nothing could stop it now.

It was enough to give anyone the jitters. Just that alone. But suddenly a cry went up from one of the men. His arm shot forward. It pointed toward the sea.

Eyes strained to see.

"Look!"

Cranfield remained calm. He too had seen. The chill that ran up his back was uncontrollable.

Something rode the combers. A dark object, as yet indistinct. It might be only a sack from a liner. It might be a dead dog. It might be—

The sea was relentless. Inch by inch it threw the hulk inwardly. The waves caught it, turned it over and over, and pushed it further to shore.

For a moment the moon broke through the dark clouds. A strip of silver light fell on the turbid waters. It caught in its glare the hulk that was coming in awash.

A screech came up from the crowd as the waves lifted the hulk and flung

it over a watery crest. Under the sudden glare they saw the stiffened arms, fingers outstretched, of a body.

The clouds blotted out the light

"What was that?" screeched the Duke. "What was that?" His voice trembled. It was tinged with the fear of men who are caught in supernatural things. He could not understand that what his eyes had glimpsed was real.

No one answered. "What was that? What was that?" He screeched over and over.

Flood-tide was at its height. It was nursing all its power now for one last heave shoreward. For a moment there was a restless moment of calm. Then the sea gathered its strength and thundered to the shore, beating, pounding, wailing.

With it came the corpse. The wash of the water flung it high above the waterline.

Cranfield's pocket flash was out instantly. The finger of light probed at the sprawled form turned back by the sea.

It was the body of Richardson.

The sheriff's gun poked hard in the small of Duke's back. Yet it was unnecessary. The wizen-faced racketeer could not move. His thin lips were open. A whiteness blanched his face as with straining eyes he gazed at the body. It was evident that fright had engulfed him.

He could not understand exactly what had happened. A creature of superstition always, little could he find to interpret this phenomenon. He hardly heard the bitter words announced by Cranfield. "Duke Morgan, I place you under arrest for the murder of Thompson Richardson."

Two of the sheriff's deputies clamped handcuffs on him and began leading him away.

To the amazed gathering Cranfield turned. "Well I suppose you might as well know about this hocus-pocus. Last night I saw the Duke throw something into the water. It was the body of Richardson. It so happens that I know these waters pretty well. When I was a boy I used to throw logs of wood into the sea. Once I threw one in about the same place that the Duke used. The next night it came back at this point, almost a hundred feet distant. I tried it again with a bottle in which I placed a message. Sure enough the following night at flood-tide, the bottle came back I'd almost forgotten this peculiarity of the sea until this unfortunate murderer came to our midst.

"I'm mighty glad to have done my duty even though a lot of you thought I must be outta my head getting you down here. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm goin' up to see if I can bring some of the color back in Duke's face"



Big-House Bait

By William A. Langford



Young Joe had been on Straight Street for a year, and was now going to be married. But his former pals had a different idea—an idea of big-house bait in a corpse trap.



JOE knew that he mustn't get caught. That was the first thing that banged into his head when the man dropped dead. He had to get away at once. But it all happened so quickly.

He was walking down the street, carrying the handbag. It was quite late; past midnight. The street was almost deserted. And Joe was thinking of Mary. He knew that Mary was expecting him in Baneville. They were going to be married. He was to take the morning train.

He was so absorbed with thoughts of Mary, that he didn't see anyone at first. Mary had given him a year's grace. He had told her of his past when he'd had a different last name. He had assured her that he had never really hurt anyone; that he never wanted to hurt anyone.

And he had figured it all out by himself that he couldn't be a crook without hurting people sooner or later—even if he only used his guns to throw a scare into the folks he held up.

Joe had told her all that. And she had believed him, without much difficulty. He was such a gentle-looking fellow, something like a piano-player is supposed to look; mild-mannered

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and soft-voiced. And he liked to read—especially history.

But because she was wiser than he, Mary had decided that he must prove his worth by living one clean, honest year. He had done that. And she had written him that she was all ready for the wedding.

Mary knew. But nobody else—for Mary's sake—must know.

THEN it happened. He was walking down the street. He had almost reached a corner—carrying a handbag. A car was standing at the curb. On the sidewalk, near the car, was a young man. Joe had almost passed him when he recognized him. He tried to hurry by, but the young man stopped him.

"How're you, Joe?" he said, staring at him queerly.

"Hello, Louis," Joe answered, pausing for a minute.

Joe really hadn't wanted to see Louis, because Louis belonged to a past that he wanted to leave far behind. And, of all of his old associates, there were none he liked less than Louis. But, having stopped, it seemed necessary to be friendly.

"How's things, Louis?" asked Joe.

Louis' grin was barely visible in the darkness. "Busy as hell," he said. "Busy as hell."

Joe was uncomfortable. "That's swell, Louis," he said.

"How's things with you, Joe?" Louis said then.

"Couldn't be better," said Joe. He would not, of course, tell him about Mary, nor about anything else, for that matter. "Leaving town in the morning."

Louis didn't seem to be looking at him. But he kept on talking, musingly. "What's in the handbag, Joe?"

Joe answered promptly: "History, Louis. In four volumes. One large and three—"

And then it happened. Louis was paying no attention to Joe at all. Another man had swung around the cor-

ner, was a few feet away. He stopped abruptly as he saw Louis.

Something appeared in Louis' hand. Flame stabbed the darkness. Shots shattered the stillness of the night.

The man cried out something hoarsely, then sank to the ground.

A gun clattered on the sidewalk beside the fallen man. Louis was in the car instantly, and driving rapidly away. Joe stood quite still, unable to move. He was still thinking, wildly, of Mary.

ALMOST at once, another man appeared from around the corner. He was a large man, with a cunning face. He had, Joe somehow noticed, a long thin nose. He stared at the man on the ground. He seemed not to notice Louis driving away in the car.

Then it was that Joe realized in a flash that he had to get away. This man had seen him. There was a dead man on the ground, a gun alongside of him—and no one else but Joe.

And that would mean a murder charge!

There was the dead man—and there was the gun! Louis' fingerprints would not be on that gun, for he had worn gloves. Joe would probably find it impossible to prove that it wasn't his. If he were caught, he would be charged with murder; his past record would be brought up, and even if he managed to prove his innocence, his future with Mary would be destroyed.

Louis, of course, would have an alibi all ready; it wouldn't do any good for Joe to tell the police that Louis did it.

The man on the corner was still staring at Joe. Suddenly, two or three other men appeared from doorways across the street. Joe turned and ran down the block. He was far short of the next corner when another large figure appeared ahead of him—a patrolman.

Joe stopped short. It appeared to him vaguely, then, that several men were running in his direction.

He was standing in front of a two-story house. His eyes caught sight of a card in the window: *FURNISHED ROOMS*. Running from the sidewalk, by the side of the building, back to the rear, was a dark walk.

Joe turned and ran swiftly down the walk.

He halted abruptly in a back yard. The yard was surrounded by a high fence, too high to climb without something to stand on. There was nothing to stand on.

Three steps ran up to a small porch and the back door of the house. Joe ran up the steps, tried the door. It was locked. Near the door was a small window. The glass window had been left open, but there was a latched screen.

Joe produced a knife, quickly pulled the screen as far away from the window as possible, inserted the knife and dislodged the catch. He swung the screen open, sprang up on the sill. It was a little awkward, because he was still clinging to the handbag. But he made it.

There were footsteps pounding down the walk toward him.

He slipped across the sill, dropped to the floor inside, pulled the screen down and latched it. He was in a small pantry. It was dark, but he could make out shelves and cupboards; close by was an open doorway.

Just outside, in the backyard, were sounds of heavy, lunging tramping. Then there was silence for a moment.

Joe squinted through the screen. Some one was playing a flashlight against the high walls.

"He ain't here," muttered a voice.

"And he couldn't of got over them fences this quick," said another.

"Maybe got in the house here some way," said the first.

Almost at once, the footsteps started again and came up on the back porch.

Joe moved quickly through the open doorway into a corridor. He stood there in the darkness for a moment as he heard some one trying the back door, at the end of the corridor. He

stepped forward lightly then. The corridor ran straight through the house to the front door.

Halfway down the corridor, a stairway started up to the second floor. Probably the best thing to do, Joe thought, was to go to the front door, open it, glance out, watch for a chance to walk away from the house. He could pretend, if necessary, to be a roomer in the house, just going out.

He reached the bottom of the stairway, stopped suddenly. Some one was at the front door, just inserting a key.

SWIFTLY, Joe found the bottom step of the stairway, started up. He had reached the top when the front door opened. He paused there, out of sight from the bottom. The man who had entered made straight for the stairs. Joe slipped down the dimly-lit second-floor corridor. There were doors on each side of him. If only he could risk finding one room empty—

Soon he had reached the end of the corridor. The footsteps were coming deliberately up the stairs. There was only one small window at the end of the corridor, high up. It offered no escape.

Just to the right of him was a closed door. Joe seized the knob, turned it, pushed. The door opened. He entered the dark room noiselessly, closed the door again. He stood against the door in the darkness, waited.

The footsteps were coming along the corridor. Presently they halted. Then he heard some one knocking on a door—the door just across the corridor.

There was a silent pause, then came the low voice of the man in the corridor, talking to some one in the room there, through the door. "Hey, Post, open up!"

The man's voice sounded excited.

Joe could hear the door across the corridor being opened, and the blurred sound of whispering voices. Then the door closed again.

Joe's sigh of relief was suppressed, and brief. He was in some one's room.

He did not know, yet, if he was alone. His eyes tried to pierce the darkness, but he could see nothing but vague shapes.

He moved away from the doorway, slowly, his hand groping along the wall. Presently his fingers stopped against a light button. He thought a moment.

He could wait there in the darkness, or he could switch on the light. There were risks in either course. He decided quickly. He pressed his finger against the button.

The room was bathed in sudden light. There was no one but himself in the room. It was well-furnished; a bed, table, desk, divan, chairs. A man's room, evidently, for ties were slung over the bureau.

It seemed very quiet in the room. Joe moved about on tiptoe, put the handbag down on the floor, behind the divan, then sat down on a chair.

Suppose somebody came in, caught him there? He would claim that he had just made a mistake; say that he was making an urgent call on a friend, but that he had never been there before, and that he thought that it was his friend's room and had decided to wait for him.

It was a far-fetched explanation, but the best he could think of.

He began to think, then, of the man Louis had shot, down there near the corner. The dead man, no doubt, was a crook, like Louis. Society would not suffer from his passing. Still it was murder. It worried Joe to think that he was running from the law, holding back what he knew to save himself. But, he told himself, he was doing it for Mary rather than for himself.

Mary! She would be waiting for him in the morning. It was now about one o'clock. The train left at six, reached Baneville at nine. And now—here he was!

Joe reflected, a little bitterly, that he wouldn't be here now except for his anxiety to clean up the past completely before the wedding.

SO far, no one knew that he had seen the killing—no one except the man who had turned the corner just after it had happened, the man with the long thin nose. That man was the only one who could recognize him.

But he couldn't stay in this room much longer. He decided to leave the room, go to the head of the stairs, and, if possible, make another try for the front door.

Joe got up, started toward the door. He had almost reached it when he heard the door across the corridor being opened, and the voices of two men. He heard distinctly the voice of one of the men, saying: "If there's any trouble, Carson will call me."

Then the door was closed again. Joe stopped, waited, listening for the visiting man to go back down the corridor to the stairs. Then, suddenly, he caught his breath. The man was not going down the corridor; he had crossed it, had his hand on the door-knob of this room!

In a dizzy frenzy, Joe rehearsed what he was to say to the man, about his visiting a friend, and the friend being out, and—

Abruptly, the door swung wide open.

The man standing there was the one who had seen him down on the corner—the man with the long thin nose!

Joe stood speechless. The man in the doorway stared at him just as he had stared at him outside on the street. Even at a distance of several feet, he seemed to tower over Joe. A slow grin appeared on his face.

Then he called out, in a loud voice: "Heh, Post, come here!"

THE door was still open. Joe saw the door across the corridor open then, and another man appeared, bathrobe over pajamas.

"What's the matter, Stacker?" he asked.

He came across the corridor, stood by the side of the man called Stacker. He, too, stared.

"See what I found!" said Stacker.
"Who the hell is he?" asked Post.
Stacker laughed. "Why, he's the punk that drilled poor old Slausen!"

Joe was still silent. He noted that this Stacker knew the murdered man—noted it vaguely, still driven by the thought that he had to get away, somehow.

"I didn't kill anyone!" he said suddenly.

Stacker laughed again. "Post," he said, sharply, "you frisk this lug!"

Post, a short, strongly-built man with a block for a head, approached Joe carefully, ran a hand over him.

"He ain't got a thing," he said finally. "Not a thing that looks like a gat." He grinned at Joe.

"Guess he only had one on him," said Stacker. "That's the one he used on Slausen—and he threw that down on the sidewalk." He was looking at Post queerly. "You hang onto him, Post. I'll go get the law!"

Joe looked anxious. "But I tell you—"

"Aw, shut up!"

Post pushed him back, and he suddenly sat on the edge of the bed. Stacker looked at him once more, in his queer way, then turned and went out. Joe could hear him hurrying along the corridor, then down the stairs.

Post was standing over him. Joe could see that he was very powerful, in spite of his shortness.

Post grinned. "You look like a hell of a killer to me," he said. "Still you never can tell by a guy's looks. What did you plug him for?"

"I didn't," said Joe. "I—I just happened to be around when it happened."

"Yeah? Then why did you beat it?"

Joe couldn't answer that. It was because of Mary. It came to him again, with sudden force, that he had to get away. But Stacker would be back soon—in a minute or two—with the cops.

Instinctively, he started to his feet. Post pushed him in the face, forced him down again. Joe looked up at the

man. There was no question that Post was much stronger than he. But Joe was quick—very quick.

"I climbed in a back window," he announced, suddenly.

"Yeah?" said Post, not very much interested.

"And I hurt my foot," Joe went on. He bent down quickly, as if to rub his foot. His hands reached out, caught Post by the ankles. He jerked sharply. Post spun in the air, crashed to the floor.

Almost before Post hit the floor, Joe snatched the clothes off the bed, flung them over Post — sheets and blankets. He was on his feet now, took the table and pushed it over on Post, now struggling in the bedding.

Joe ran for the door, slipped the key out of the lock on the inside, stepped out to the corridor just as Post was emerging from the bedding. Joe slammed the door shut and locked it, while inside Post was roaring like a bull.

Joe ran down the corridor, skipped down the stairs, light feet hitting the steps softly, reached the main floor hallway. He had almost reached the front door, which was partly open, when he heard steps and voices on the sidewalk outside.

Just beside him, to the left, was an open doorway. The room inside was lighted—one standing lamp. Instantly, Joe guessed that this was the landlady's room, that perhaps she had gone out to get the police with Stacker.

He stepped into the room, stood behind the door.

The front door was being pushed open. He could hear Stacker's voice, talking to the others: "I got a pal of mine watching him."

Then a woman's voice—probably, Joe thought, the landlady's — said: "The nerve of the fellow, coming up into my place like that!"

THEY all hurried past the open door, then up the stairs. There was a terrific clatter from upstairs. Joe knew that was Post hammering

on the locked door. And he knew that he couldn't wait. He stepped back out to the hallway. The street door was still open. He paused a brief moment, then, as calmly as he could, walked out.

Just outside he was brought to a full stop; standing on the sidewalk was a uniformed policeman. The patrolman eyed him dubiously.

"Well," Joe said, rapidly, "they got him all right."

"Yeah?" said the patrolman.

"Sure," said Joe, lightly. "My pal, Stacker, left me to take care of him. It was a cinch—just a little guy, no bigger than me. They got him now. Sent me down to ask you to come up and help him."

The patrolman ran up the steps to the house, not waiting for Joe. Joe walked away, trying not to appear to be hurrying. He reached the next corner, was just turning it, when he thought he heard a commotion back at the front door of the rooming-house.

He was out of sight now. He felt the urge to race away. But he knew that would be difficult. They would be after him at once.

He stopped suddenly. There, at the curb, was a taxi. Joe yanked open the door, jumped in.

"Hey," yelled the driver. "You can't do that. I got a fare. I'm waiting—"

"There's an alley right across the street," Joe cut in. "And I got plenty dough. I'm getting away from a tough guy. You go like hell!"

He had pulled his wallet from his pocket, was displaying it. The driver grinned, started the taxi, shot across the street and up the alley.

"Don't stop until I tell you," Joe shouted at him.

Joe was elated. It had been unexpectedly easy. The taxi was sliding away at top speed, skidding around corners, vanishing completely away from the scene of the murder.

Suddenly, Joe sat up taut. His lips went dry. Sweat dampened his forehead. The handbag! He had left the handbag up there in Stacker's room

—they could trace him by that bag.

Joe leaned forward, touched the driver on the shoulder.

"Stop!" he yelled.

The taxi skidded to a stop. The driver turned and stared at him.

"What the—"

"Go back!" Joe said wearily. "Take me back to where you picked me up!"

THE driver muttered his astonishment, swung the cab about and headed back. He was taking his time now.

"Go fast!" urged Joe. "Fast as you can!"

In less than ten minutes from the time he had left, Joe was stepping out of the taxi. He paid the driver, stood on the sidewalk, thinking rapidly. He was thinking of what he had heard Stacker tell Post out there in the corridor—that some one named Carson would call him if there was any trouble.

Down on the next corner, away from the rooming house, was a drug store.

Joe speeded in that direction, entered the store, spoke to the clerk: "Who runs the rooming house down in the next block?"

"Mrs. Buzzel," the clerk said promptly. "But I don't think you'd like it there — she's a crabby old witch."

"Okay," said Joe. "That's all I need to know."

He stepped to the phone booth, thumbed the directory, found the number, dialed it. A lady's voice answered presently, rather irritably. Joe had torn a sheet from the back of the directory, held it over the mouthpiece, lowered his voice.

"Let me speak to Stacker," he said. "And tell him to make it snappy."

"Oh, all right," said the woman, grudgingly.

Joe waited. Soon came the sound of Stacker's voice: "Hello."

"Carson talking," said Joe. "Trouble. Come right over."

"But—"

"Can the chatter. Big trouble. Got to get it fixed up. Come right over."

He snapped the receiver on the hook, stepped out into the drug store, killed a few minutes looking over the magazine rack. Then, disregarding the curious stare of the clerk, he stepped out, walked briskly down the street toward the rooming house.

The street was deserted now. Joe turned and walked up the front steps, tried the door. It was locked. He quickly walked down the steps again, then went along the alleyway by the side of the house.

He hesitated a moment. Everything was quiet. He climbed in through the pantry window as he had before. There he stood still, listened. The house seemed utterly quiet. In a little while he was walking noiselessly along the second-floor corridor toward the rear. He stopped just outside Stacker's room, his ear close to the door.

There were no voices, nothing to indicate that there was anyone in the room. Stacker, no doubt, had left in response to the phone call. And the officers would have nothing to wait there for.

In a moment, Joe grasped the knob, turned it, pushed. The room was in darkness. He closed the door again. He jabbed the light button. There was no one in the room. He made for the divan.

The handbag was there!

A moment later he was walking quickly out of the room, carrying the handbag; down the stairs to the front door. He snapped off the night latch, opened the door, peered out cautiously.

There was still no one in sight. He was out on the sidewalk and walking briskly down the street in a few seconds—down toward the corner where Louis had killed Slausen an hour or so before.

JOE was breathing easier now. He was within a step or two of the corner. So he had slipped through, after all! He was thinking again of

Mary, of the wedding in the morning, of their life together, of—

A large man emerged from the shadows, then another. The two men were directly in front of him. He found that he could not pass them, and he stopped.

One of them turned a flashlight on.

"Say, Bill," said one of them, with a note of surprise, "this looks like the guy we're looking for!"

"Yeah," said the other. "The guy with the handbag. Come along with us!"

Joe found his voice: "With — with you! Where to?"

"Headquarters," said the man.

Joe was simply swept along. The two detectives had a car around the corner. They seemed to be having fun kidding him.

"Help the guy with the handbag, Bill," said the one who took the wheel.

Joe moved his hand back. "No," he protested. "I'll—"

But the one called Bill took the handbag from him, put it carefully in the back of the car. Then he got in with Joe. In a few minutes they were walking into a stone building. And before long they were sitting in a bare-looking office.

They were both looking him over, intently, from his soft felt hat to his small-sized shoes.

"Yeah," said one of them. "He answers the description, all right, Bill."

"Sure he does," said Bill, who was staring at Joe. "You ain't denying it, are you?"

Joe stammered: "But I—"

"Wait a minute." The phone bell had interrupted. The detective called Bill reached for the instrument, listened, chuckled, said "okay" several times, then hung up, grinned at the other detective, and turned to Joe again. "You ain't denying you seen that killing?"

Joe's lips moved, but he couldn't talk.

"Lemme help you," said the other detective. "It was this way. You was walking along, toting your handbag,

and you run into a guy named Louis Delano. Delano sees a chance to frame a stranger, and he stops you. Then another guy comes around the corner and Louis drills him and drives away. But another guy named Stacker pokes his long nose in—and you beat it!"

Joe nodded slowly. "I guess I have to tell you the truth—"

"Sure you do," Bill said enthusiastically. "You was a witness! Trouble is these witnesses to gang killings are always scared and beat it. But you're gonna do your part for law and order, ain't you?"

"Sure I am," said Joe. "But—"

"Attaboy! Well, this case is cleared up in a hurry. That's all due to the phone call!"

"Phone call?" said Joe, startled.

"Sure. We was up there talking to Stacker, and he was giving us a line about you. But we kind of figured him in on the deal. He was supposed to be a pal of Slausen's—the guy that got wiped out. But he really put him on the spot for Louis, see? Well, the phone call came for him and he went out and a couple of our boys tailed him and he went straight to a pal of Louis' named Carson. Louis was there, too. And our boys got the lowdown on the whole thing. The hoods figured it for a pinch and started shooting. But they didn't get away with it. Our men shot back, and Slausen. Louis,

Carson—all of 'em were killed. Good thing. Saved the state trial costs." He paused. "That phone call done it!"

JOE drew a long breath. "Here's my address," he said, writing on a piece of paper. "And my name. I been working for Mosen & Rand, Wholesalers, for the last year. You can get me any time you want me. Can I go now?"

The two detectives exchanged glances.

"Okay," said the one called Bill.

"Any time after noon," said Joe. "I'm getting married—" he looked at the clock—"in six hours."

"Good luck. And don't forget your handbag," said Bill.

Joe wasn't forgetting it.

"What's in it?" asked the other officer.

"History," said Joe. "Ancient history. In four volumes — three small and one large. Goodnight!"

Outside he got in a taxi. The taxi took him to the entrance of the park. He walked in the park to the lake, stopped there, looked around.

He unlocked the handbag, opened it. His hand went in four times, and each time it came out his arm made a swinging motion.

Far out in the lake dropped three automatic pistols and a sawed-off shotgun



They killed a cop in front of his own precinct house. And they laughed—for they didn't know they had made

A Date With Doom



Len got his gun out, but before he could shoot—

By Chester Brant



THE night was windy, wet with a cold drizzle, when Jerry Kirk slammed up the steps at the 8th Precinct station house. But neither bad weather, nor the baleful green lights at the door, dulled the enthusiasm in his boyish blue eyes. He was a rookie,

just out of police school, and tonight, for the first time, he was legging his beat alone. The prospect sent his spirits soaring.

It didn't matter to him—in fact, he was glad—that his post was a dirty, tumble-down section, where empty warehouses and rotting docks formed a graveyard of past prosperity. That was as it should be. All the Kirks had started there. The Kirks, a family of fighting cops. His father before him,

later an inspector, had pounded that beat. And, more recently, his brother, Len. Len was now second-grade detective attached to this same precinct.

Inside, before hurrying to his locker to don bright new serge and glittering buttons, the rookie paused at the detective room. There was just time to say "hello" to Len before the latter went off duty. Jerry welcomed the chance, because now they wouldn't be seeing each other much, since they worked on different shifts. He eased the door open, thrust in his fiery red thatch of hair, while a ready grin cracked across his freckled face.

Detective Lieutenant Lentz was first to see him. "Come on in, kid," the grizzled veteran invited. "Where's your uniform? Len here's been crowin' about how swell you make it look and—blamed if I think he's seen it on you yet!"

Jerry's brother, standing with another man close beside him, turned quickly. He was taller, heavier than the slightly built rookie, but his eyes had the same fearless intensity, his chin the same proud strength. "Don't let the lieutenant kid you, bud," he warned. "He knows anyone looks good in uniform—if he's a Kirk."

In the laugh that followed Jerry got a look at the fellow on his brother's left, saw why he stood so close. A circle of steel glittered about his wrist, binding him prisoner to the tall detective. A mountain of a man, with close-bunched, burly shoulders, he stood in sullen silence, his small, ratty eyes half-veiled by drooping lids. Jerry frowned. Something vaguely familiar . . .

"Take a good squint, bud," Len grinned, as he swung the prisoner into better view. "It's the last time you'll see him—I hope. Three-time loser. This time, if we send him up, it's for keeps." He smiled at the boy's puzzled scrutiny. "Don't remember him, huh? Well, he has changed some since you batted each other around at Public School nineteen. He's—"

"Mitts' Berger!" said Jerry, as recognition flamed in his eyes. Sure, he knew him. Bully, tough kid—in a school where all kids were tough. Jerry remembered—remembered how he'd fought the roughneck, older, bigger than himself, when he picked on smaller boys.

They glared at each other, eyes blazing in fierce renewal of a boyhood hatred. Jerry asked: "What've you got on him? Whad' you bring him here for? Why not headquarters?"

Len winked at the grizzled lieutenant. "Guess they still don't teach 'em all the tricks at police school." He explained to Jerry: "We picked Mitts up on suspicion. Think he pulled the silk-loft job two nights ago. Mitts and a couple of other mugs. Shot up the watchman, left him for dead. Got away with a truck-load of silk. Twenty grand, maybe more."

"But why bring him here?" Jerry insisted.

"Because—" Len's tone was hard, bitter—"he's got a smart mouthpiece. The shyster's always beat the rap before—shot him off scot-free or with just a few months' sentence. This time—" he smiled bleakly at his glowering prisoner—"we fixed that. Took Mitts to headquarters, gave him the phone call that the law allows, then booked him under a phony name he's used once or twice." He laughed. "When the mouthpiece showed up with his writ, there wasn't any Mitts Berger on hand. We'd brought him out here for safe-keeping. No rigged-up alibi is gonna bust this case!"

"Nerts!" growled the big, apish fellow. "You ain't got nothin' on me!"

Jerry asked: "Where are you taking him now, Len?"

"St Mary's Hospital. The watchman's pulling through. Conscious now—ought to be able to identify this mug." Len grinned sourly at the sullen crook. "That's got your rodmen plenty scared, Mitts. Some one tried to plug the watchman today from a window across the street from the hospital. Not that they give a hang

about you, Mitts. It's just they know you'll rat unless they fix the case."

"Nerts!" snarled the prisoner again.

Len glanced at his strap-watch. "Hey, bud," he told Jerry, "snap it up! You'll be late to your post—and that doesn't go in the Kirk family!"

The rookie grinned guiltily, waved a hasty goodby, and skipped nimbly up to the locker-room. A few other cops were there. He laughed good-naturedly at their kidding as he laid out his new uniform with loving care. He began a swift change.

"Too bad it's rainin', kid," one man said drily. "The rubber coat's gonna hide your nice new buttons."

Fastening his tunic, Jerry crossed to the window. He pushed back the shade, peered out. The street gleamed a shiny black in the cold drizzle still dripping from sullen, overcast skies. He sighed. The fellow was right. He'd have to wear the clumsy, rubber poncho.

Down below he saw that Len was just coming out with his burly charge. As they walked down the steps; stood waiting at the curb, an indulgent smile pulled at Jerry's wide mouth. It was like Len—a little careless, maybe—to stand there, unmindful of the rain, while a driver brought the squad car around from in back.

THE rookie's face, as he watched, went suddenly white. He'd seen something else! Something that sent him clawing madly at the window, while he stared, fascinated, at the scene below. The window stuck—then shot up with a bang.

"Len!" he screamed wildly. "Look out!"

Too late! The big sedan had sidled up, almost reached the two men at the curb. Something gleamed, caught the light, as the front window slid down. A silencer-fitted pistol. It went *plop* faintly, and a wisp of smoke curled from its ugly snout.

A groan tore from Jerry's throat as he saw his brother go down, taking Mitts Berger with him. Len got his

gun out, but before he could shoot—the silenced pistol spoke again. Len slumped on the sidewalk.

For one brief instant, Jerry glimpsed the white, up-tilted face of his brother. Blood was welling from a hole between the eyes. Then Mitts Berger, still cuffed to the murdered dick, seized the lifeless body in his brawny arms. He leaped bodily toward the yawning rear door of the sedan.

As the motor thundered its song of power, Jerry's .38 kicked sharply against his sweaty palm. The sedan's rear window shivered to splinters. He emptied his gun, firing at the tires. But the death car skittered around a corner, was gone in a burst of frenzied speed.

The squad-car driver, wheeling into the street, took up the chase, his siren lifted in a vengeful shriek. The station house door poured men. They stood, helpless, on the sidewalk, staring numbly at the red streaks on the rain-wet pavement.

Jerry stumbled into a chair. His head pressed tight into quivering hands, his slight figure jerked with dry sobs. He was unaware of the consoling hands laid hesitantly on his shoulders. Len was dead. Len, his brother, his pal. Len, who'd put him through school, taken care of him when their father's death made them orphans. Len.

Suddenly his shoulders squared. He lunged to his feet, his face gleaming white under tousled red hair. His lips, thinned to a line by tight-clenched jaws, matched the hardness of his steely eyes. He faced Captain MacArthur, who'd entered the room.

"Sir," he announced huskily, "I've something to report. The license number—"

The older man nodded. "We got it," he interrupted. "We're checking, but it's probably a stolen car."

Jerry, fighting his voice to keep it steady, jerked out "Sir! I want to go after those rats! I—I've got to!"

The captain frowned, shook his silver-streaked head uncomfortably.

"You're a patrolman, Kirk, not a detective. Besides," he added, smiling slightly, "your request should go to Sergeant Meador, not to me."

Ruddy-faced Sergeant Meador appraised the grimness in Jerry's eyes. "Sure, my lad," came his gentle, fatherly voice, "we all know how it is you feel. But 'tis not your job. Go to your post, boy. Keep busy. You'll feel better that way."

"No!" It was a shout, wracked from the rookie's grief-torn soul. "I'm going after them! I'm going, I tell you! With your orders—or without!"

"Kirk!" The sergeant's voice took a knife-keen edge. "Remember—you're a cop! You've got your orders! Now—obey them!"

"Sorry, sir," Jerry mumbled. He reached for his rubber poncho.

The ruddy-faced man put a leathery hand about the rookie's shoulders. "We'll do all we can, son," he promised. "We'll let you know what develops. The desk sergeant'll tell you when you make your call-ins."

"We've got one lead," the silver-haired captain put in comfortingly. "May not pan out, but it's a lead. Of course, that tip-off to Mitts Berger's hoods might've been a leak at headquarters. But I'm afraid—" he shook his head gloomily—"that the slip was right here. That truck driver we released after questioning had a chance to see Mitts, find out we had him here. He may have been the tip-off. I've detailed some men to bring him in."

JERRY nodded, forced a wan smile to his lips as he said goodnight. He squared his shoulders as he went down the stairs, conscious of sympathetic eyes that followed him. Outside, the wind slapped into his face with reviving sharpness. The rain had stopped. He took one shuddering glance at the spot where Len had fallen, then marched resolutely toward his post.

The man he believed was waiting at the call-box. Jerry took the phone

from him, checked in with the desk sergeant.

"The sedan got away, kid," he was told. "Somewhere down there in your territory. Some radio cars had joined the chase. And then—well, it just disappeared. Keep your eyes open, kid. You may get that action you wanted."

His mouth set in a grim line, Jerry began his patrol. Resolutely he fought down the tightness that clutched his throat. As he strode woodenly through grimy, unkempt streets, his night-stick swinging at his side, he forced his mind to his duties. Few people were about, and most of the dingy little shops and business houses were closed. As was required of him, he carefully tried the doors.

He reached the end of his beat, circled back along a dark, lonely waterfront. Occasionally a radio car buzzed by, showing that the search still went on. Unaided now by street lights, Jerry dutifully played his flashlight over warehouse fronts, knifed the beam into black, turgid water along deserted docks.

One big shed held his interest. For a long moment he stood stock still, staring at its blank, unpainted front. The building was much like the others. A long, low structure, built out over the water on piles. What had made him stop he didn't know. But an eerie feeling of recognition sent prickles up his spine.

He could see nothing wrong. He shrugged, started to move on. Then, still unsatisfied, he turned back, sent his flashlight once more flicking over the old, weatherbeaten hulk. He nodded. The padlock, no doubt, was what had caught his eye. It was shiny, new.

That, in itself, was not suspicious, but he stepped nearer to inspect it. His feet made a muddy track to the wide double doors. Jerry's eyes flared wide, and a pulse hammered in his temple. His tracks stood out with utmost clearness. Why? Because the area in front of the doors had felt the recent strokes of a broom! Two lanes, running out into the roadway,

showed unmistakable marks of the bristles.

The answer was obvious. A car had entered this warehouse, shortly after the rain, and its muddy tire-prints had been scrubbed out.

Jerry's brain rocketed. Did he have the killers bottled up in there? It seemed an unbelievable stroke of luck. And yet, everything pointed that way. It was somewhere near here that the prowl cars had lost their quarry. A perfect place for the hoodlums to hide—probably, in fact, where they'd stored the loot from the silk-loft job.

Jerry considered. The rule-book was very clear on the point of getting help. But if he went for help, it would give the killers a chance to slip out. Maybe they'd seen him flash his light, were watching him now. His jaws clamped in stern decision.

He picked his way to the side of the shed, seeking a point of entrance. Cautiously he used his flash, peered for a spot where rotting boards had fallen away. It wasn't till he'd reached the water-edge that he found such a hole. There, just where the shed went out into the river on piles, an upward thrust of the light showed a gap in the wooden flooring.

TH E rookie pulled off his encumbering poncho, left it on the bank. Then, clambering out over the swirling, murky waters on the pile-braces, he maneuvered till the hole was just over his head. No ray of light filtered down. No sound, save the angry, churning below, reached his listening ears.

He heaved upward through the jagged opening. If anyone waited, concealed in the pitch-black gloom, this was their chance. Nothing happened. He struggled to his feet inside the shed, rubbed dust from his eyes. He dragged out his service gun, held it clutched in his right, while his left fingered the flash.

He was not alone. Some inner sense gave him warning. It lifted the hair at the back of his neck, but did not

place his enemies. They might be anywhere, before him, behind, at his sides. One gleam of his flash and he'd be a target. He paused, sniffing for the odor of burned gasoline.

Tense though he was, he wasn't prepared for what happened. Directly ahead two lights flashed on. The twin eyes of a car. He blinked, dazzled, tried to hurl himself out of their range.

But he crashed head-on with a shadowy figure that leaped to meet him. Stunned by the jarring impact, Jerry nevertheless swung his gun in a blind circle. It thunked solidly against bone. Even as he stumbled off-balance from the force of the blow, the rookie exulted. One man was out of the fray.

"Get 'im, you lugs!" husked a voice from the car.

Jerry went rigid. That man—Mitts Berger! A red mist swirled in his eyes as he lunged toward the lights. His .38 thundered. The windshield shattered in a thousand pieces.

Searing pain lanced Jerry's shoulder. He wheeled. That shot hadn't come from the car. Across the fan of light a crouched man held a smoking gun, was triggering another shot. The rookie lurched sideward and lead whistled wide. His own gun spoke, sent the fellow groveling on his face. Blood gushed from the hole in his head.

An animal snarl ripped from Jerry's throat. One man left—Mitts Berger. He reeled drunkenly toward the glaring headlights. But, even as he did so, the engine roared. Rubber whined as the car leaped forward. Like a howling juggernaut, it bore down on the rookie in its path.

If he could wedge himself in a corner— But the wall was too far. He'd never make it. Jerry groaned. Mitts Berger, the killer, would go free.

Wild-eyed, he looked for shelter. There was none. A few packing-cases lay strewn about, but they'd splinter like matchwood. The roaring car was close upon him when he turned to run. He raced madly toward the river-end of the shed.

The rending crash of wood told him his trick had worked. The lights swerved in a wide arc. Rubber screamed as the tail of the car whipped around. Jerry looked back. The right front wheel had gone through the rotten flooring over the water, and the car was trapped.

"Mitts Berger!" yelled Jerry. "Come out with your hands up!"

"Nerts to you, copper!" was the snarling response.

Instantly a storm of slugs blasted from the car. In the uncertain light Jerry made a poor target, but the lead came close. He flung himself behind a flimsy packing case. It wasn't much protection, but it screened him. He poked out his head, snapped two quick shots. The car had swung round so that the driver's door was within range. Not much chance of piercing the heavy steel, but—

A howl of agony answered his fire. Then all was still. Jerry waited. It might be a trick. He did a curious thing. Two shots remained in his police .38. He'd fired four times—but he quietly removed the empty shells and reloaded the chambers from the reserve cartridges in his pocket.

Warily he rose. Orange flame jetted from the car and white-hot pain stabbed Jerry's thigh. Mitts Berger had faked the wound. The rookie's service gun blasted twice.

A taut smile pulled Jerry's mouth

as a hoarse yell of triumph echoed from the car. Mitts Berger tumbled out, came racing forward, an automatic jutting from his hand. Jerry waited, standing erect. Berger's face, cut by glass, was a mess of gore. It added horror to the blood-lust in his eyes.

"Now, smart guy!" he screamed, leveling the gun point-blank. "Here's where you get it! Your gat's empty. I counted the slugs." His laugh ripped out. "Two Kirks in one day! I've always hated the breed. And now I'm wipin' 'em out!"

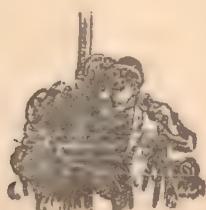
His finger whitened on the trigger, but Jerry's gun spoke first. The killer clutched at his mangled hand. Amazement stained his face, then terror.

"Don't!" he shrieked, backing from Jerry's vengeful gun. "Don't! Pinky got your brother—I didn't! You got Pinky! I—"

"I'm not going to burn you, Mitts. The state'll do that!" The rookie limped forward, blood soaking from shoulder and hip. "I'm a cop—not a killer! But, before they fry you, you'll wish a thousand times I'd finished you quick. It's a mistake to kill a cop—especially if his name's Kirk! You made your own date with doom."

Grim satisfaction wreathed Jerry's face as he put the nippers on. He knew what Len would have said—almost, it seemed, he could hear him say it:

"Good work, bud!"



A killer tries to escape the decree of . . .

Death's Signature

By Cliff Howe



After considering every angle of it, Kemmerer finally decided upon strangling as the best means of doing away with his employer, Jake Banff. In the first place, it would be a noiseless affair; in the second place, Kemmerer was a husky sort of fellow and kept himself in trim despite his clerical job by doing setting-up exercises every morning, while Banff was only a half-pint man and would strangle easy.

So Kemmerer got up as usual at six-thirty on Monday morning and turned on the radio in his room. The Freling family, with whom he lodged in the squalid tenement on the lower east side, was used to that, and never disturbed him. The station that broadcast the setting-up exercises wasn't on the air yet; it would come on at six forty-five.

He had not removed his clothes on going to bed, and now stepped fully dressed through the window onto the fire escape. He was on the top floor and it was a short climb to the roof. He crossed two roof tops, opened a skylight, walked down four flights of stairs, and was in the street. Not a soul was about.

As he hurried along, he cast a glance at the row of old-law flats and made a wry face. What a sleazy place to live in—unwashed stoops, dirty "to let" signs, bedding being aired from dozens of windows. Well, he'd soon have money enough to get away.

The Banff Metal Works occupied a two-story building two blocks away.

Jake Banff always got there at six-thirty sharp, went over the memos that Kemmerer had left for him the night before, and departed in his truck to make the rounds in Long Island, Connecticut or Jersey, as the case might be, buying old metal. He had built up a nice business in thirty years, and being sixty-four now, and alone in the world, had made a will leaving the business to Kemmerer and two other employees.

The only thing that made Kemmerer glum on this vital morning was the fact that the other two employees wouldn't even know enough to thank him when they inherited their share of the business.

He put on a pair of gloves, entered the old building, and walked up the flight of squeaking wooden stairs to the second floor where the office was located.

Jake Banff had heard the steps and was looking up from the desk at which he'd been working. When he saw Kemmerer, he put down his fountain pen and said, "Hello, there. What brings you around so early? You getting ambitious, maybe?" This with a friendly grin, for he always treated his employees as equals.

Kemmerer didn't allow himself to hesitate. He had planned too well, and time was important. He first went over to a radio in the corner and tuned it into the same station as the one in his room. He told Banff, "I couldn't sleep, Mr. Banff, so I came over. I got something to see you about."

Banff laughed. "Always nuts about radio. Why did you ever buy a radio for the office?"

Over the air came the voice of the announcer. "All right, get ready everybody. Setting-up—"

Kemmerer nodded. He had put the radio in the office just for this purpose—to make sure there was no accidental change in the program.

He crossed over to Banff.

The little old man must have seen something peculiar in his eyes, for he said, "Kem—what's the matter?"

Kemmerer's face was hard. "Nothing," he muttered, and bent, put his two hands around Banff's throat

Banff was weak, and old, and his resistance was negligible. But his body thrashed spasmodically; he tried to shout, but the sound resembled a croak more than anything else. In his eyes there was astounded disbelief. His arms flailed wildly, and his fingers caught in Kemmerer's vest pocket, and the red Parkinson pen the murderer carried was flipped out. It sailed in a short arc, and just as Banff gasped his life out, it struck the floor and shattered to pieces.

KEMMERER sat the limp, purple faced body back in the chair and swore to himself. He stooped quickly to recover the pieces. Then panic assailed him. Suppose some of the pieces should be overlooked by him? Suppose they had fallen under the desk? A clever detective might find them.

He stood up, surveyed the room, started to tremble.

Then his eye lighted on the desk, and he grinned. Banff's pen was lying there, and it was exactly the same as his. The boss had bought them both at the same time.

Kemmerer picked up Banff's pen, capped it, wiped it off with his gloves, and put it in his pocket. There was one thing he'd have to remember, though—Banff always used green ink in his pen—an old habit. He'd have to change the ink; but not now, time was short. The voice of the instructor was coming over the radio, "One-two-

three, one-two-three—" The exercises were drawing to a close.

He bent to the floor again. There was only one piece of the broken pen large enough to retain prints. He wiped it off carefully. The sack had burst, splattering black ink on the floor. He shrugged. That couldn't be remedied. They'd know it was some one else's pen. They'd surely check on the three employees. But he'd have the red pen—and he'd be sure to have black ink in it when he was questioned.

He turned off the radio, switched the dial away from the station, took a last look at the body of Banff, and stole downstairs.

Four minutes to get to his street. Two minutes to get to the roof of the house he had come through. So far so good. Three more minutes and he was across the roof tops, down the fire escape, and in his room.

His own radio was just saying, "These exercies come to you through the—"

He'd have to work fast now. Stoner, the cop on the beat over at the Banff Metal Works, always said hello to the old man as he left with the truck in the morning. When Stoner failed to see him today, he'd be sure to go up and investigate. He knew where Kemmerer and the other employees lived, and would surely give the addresses to the detectives, and Kemmerer knew he could expect a visit from the police in a very short time. He counted on that.

First he took out the fountain pen, opened it, and squirted the green ink it contained out of the window. Then he filled it from a bottle of black ink in his dresser.

He was careful to see that there were no stains anywhere, that the pen was dry on the outside and showed no signs of having been recently filled. He tried it on his memo book and nodded. It wrote good and black.

He replaced it in his pocket, then proceeded to strip off coat, vest, tie and shirt. He turned off the radio,

picked up a towel, and unlocked his door.

Mrs. Freling was in the kitchen preparing breakfast. She called out a cheery, "Good morning, Mr. Kemmerer. You have good exercises, no?"

He said, "Good morning, Mrs. Freling. I smell bacon. Turn my eggs over this morning, will you?" Then he went on into the bathroom and shaved. He was very cool. This didn't surprise him; he had planned long and well. The incident of the pen had been annoying, but he'd covered every angle of that.

He finished, taking his time. He slicked his hair back and left the bathroom.

A MAN was waiting for him in the kitchen. Mr. Freling was eating his breakfast undisturbed, but Mrs. Freling was fluttering about, excited.

"Mr. Kemmerer!" she exclaimed. "This man is from the police. He wants—"

The detective motioned to her. "All right, lady, I'll talk for myself." He turned to Kemmerer. "You been here all morning?"

Kemmerer said angrily, "What do you mean—have I been here all morning? What's it to you? What are you doing here anyhow?"

The detective held up a placating hand. "Don't get excited. I'm just checking up. Your boss, Jake Banff, was choked to death at a quarter to seven this morning!"

Kemmerer acted well. He had rehearsed. He clutched the detective's coat. "Good Lord, no!"

Mrs. Freling let out a little bleat. Mr. Freling, with a mouth full of egg, said, "Too bad. But Kemmerer had

nothing to do with it. He was in his room doing setting-up exercises, like he does every day. We heard the radio."

The detective looked at Freling. "But you didn't hear him—did you?"

Kemmerer said, "Well, of all the—"

The detective stopped him. "Wait a minute—we can settle this quick, if you'll cooperate. If you had nothing to do with it, you'll show me what I want to see, and then I can go."

"What's that?" Kemmerer asked.

"Your fountain pen!" The detective rapped it out, watching him keenly.

"My fountain pen!" Kemmerer looked blank, then shrugged. "Okay. If you want to act crazy—"

He went to his room, the officer following. The officer stood in the doorway while he got out the pen, then snatched it from him, removed the cap, and wrote with it in his note book.

He looked up disappointed. It had written black. "I guess you're all right," he said. "If this was Banff's pen it'd be filled with green ink. You see, the guy who bumped Banff, took the old man's pen, as near as I can figure out, because his own got smashed in the—"

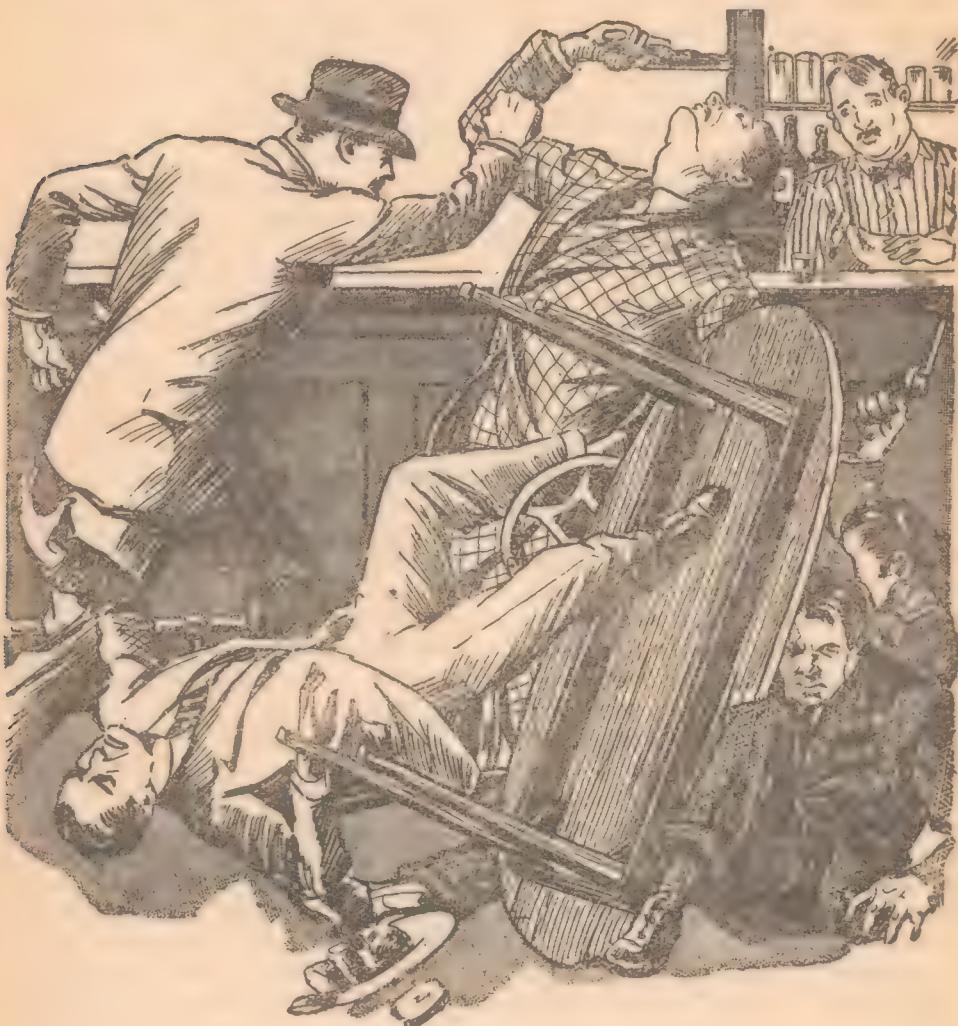
He was interrupted by a loud rapping at the outer door.

Mrs. Freling, who had come after them and had been watching with open mouth, went to answer it.

When she opened the door, an immense woman in a house dress came in, carrying a pillow. She said in a loud, angry voice, "I'm Mrs. Reilly, from the flat below. An' I wanna know what you people mean by throwing green ink down on my bedding what I was airing!" The pillow case had a large green stain, hardly dry yet, across the top.



Trigger Tribunal



By Leon Dupont

Tom Fargo, parole officer, hunted down a ruthless killer — and found that he had made himself the killer's perfect alibi.

PAROLE OFFICER TOM FARGO jabbed a button on the desk in his prison office. Ordinarily Tom's mild gray eyes were twinkling with the good things of life, but now his brows were drawn down and his jaw clamped like a vise.

"Send in Tony Balch," he ordered the trusty. "He's ready, isn't he?"

"He's been ready for three hours, sir. In fact, he's almost nuts waitin' for you to call him."

"Get him," Tom snapped and to himself he appended a thought: "If

I could keep that rat waiting here ten years, I'd do it."

Tony Balch strode into the room. He was dark, crafty looking and cruelty shone bright in his black eyes. He clamped both hands flat on Tom's desk and glowered in ill concealed hate.

"Tryin' to take it out like this, are you?" he half snarled. "Makin' me wait three hours before you can see me. Listen, Fargo, I'm free, get me? I'm sprung and you can't stop me. You tried hard enough, but for once the Parole Board had sense. I—"

"Shut up!" Tom snapped. "You're not free until the main gate closes behind you—and from then on you're only paroled, remember that. You are to report to me twice a month, Balch. The first time you miss, you'll be yanked back here. You're going out of the prison over my protest, but you had money enough to buy that restaurant you say you're going to take over. You hired the best lawyers and you fooled the Board. But you're not fooling me, Balch. I know you for what you are and when you leave here, you'd best take things very easy."

Balch drew his lips back in a snarl. "Some day, mister wise guy, you're going to be sorry for tellin' me this stuff. Sure I'm on parole and I'll obey every letter of it. What kind of a sap do you think I am?"

"And I'll tell you something else," Tom went on as though Balch hadn't spoken. "I'll tell you what I couldn't explain to the Parole Board. Two years ago, Balch, you planned an escape from this prison. You succeeded in getting three machine guns and a quantity of Mills bombs smuggled in here. How, I don't know. You planned to kill anyone who stood in your way and you would have done it.

"Somebody found those guns and bombs. The man who did so never squealed, but he realized the disaster you could create once you were started on your way out. He knew that dozens of innocent men would die and—he

fixed those guns and bombs so that they were useless!"

Balch's eyes were wide in astonishment he couldn't conceal. There was concentrated hate and murder in those black orbs, too. His fingers were clenched into hard fists.

"You know who did that, Balch, and so do I. That man wasn't a squealer, although he could have fixed things so that you would never get out of here. He simply wrecked your weapons and let it go at that. You're going out of here with revenge rankling in your soul.

"Listen to this — if you harm Robert Reade, I'll come after you and your next stop will be the chair. Reade didn't sing to the warden, but I know how you feel toward him. He's going straight and—he is to be left alone. Reade told me about that, but I had to promise secrecy. Reade got nothing out of it."

Balch remained silent. Gradually the fire went out of his eyes. He became composed, suave and smiling.

"Okay. If that's all, I'll be on my way."

Tom yanked open a drawer in his desk. He took out a twenty dollar bill and a railroad ticket.

"The State gives you this money to get a start on life. The railway will carry you back to New York. That's all, Balch. Report to me here twice a month."

"Twenty bucks!" Balch sniffed contemptuously and folded the bill. He tucked it in his vest pocket. "Five years I worked for this." He threw the railroad ticket on Tom's desk. "You can keep that. I've got a car waiting outside. Some day, mister, you're going to wish you had kept your mouth shut. You could have earned enough to take care of you for the rest of your life if you'd listened to me."

"The door," Tom said curtly, "opens by turning the knob. Get out!"

Balch laughed, turned on his heel and slammed the door with all the strength he could muster. Tom sighed,

leaned back in his swivel chair and reached for a cigar.

"Parole Boards," he muttered, "can be confounded nuisances sometimes."

IT was a week later that Tom Fargo visited the metropolis not many miles from the great gray walls of the prison. He drove his coupe to the address Bob Reade had given him and two minutes after he parked, Tom was tapping at a well worn door panel of a cheap rooming house.

A tall, well knit young man with the pallor of prison still perceptible on his face, opened the door. He stared in astonishment and just the slightest semblance of fear crossed his countenance.

"Mr. Fargo!" He stepped back. "I—I—nothing is wrong, is there?"

"Not a thing," Tom grinned, "and forget the formalities, Bob. I'm Tom to you—as I am to any of my friends."

"Thanks—Tom." Bob Reade leaned against the rickety bureau while he motioned Tom into a chair. "I thought for a moment the Parole Board had changed its mind or that I'd pulled a boner or something."

"I'm here to see that you don't, Bob. You got my letter a week ago?"

"About Tony Balch?" Reade shrugged. "Hell, I'm not afraid of that rat—but thanks for the tip anyway. I'm not a squealer, Tom. You know that better than anyone else. I wrecked that armory Balch had because—oh, hell, guards have wives and kids. Balch would have gone to the chair if he went through with his scheme to escape. But I never squealed—except to you, and that was months later."

"Sure, I know. But listen, Bob. I've been in this business a long time, almost too long, it seems, sometimes. I know these rats and I know good guys, like you. Tony Balch is lower than a rat. He's the type of a man who would never face you unless half a dozen of his gorillas had you pinned to the floor. Watch him! He boasted

he'd kill you and he'll try to make good his threat."

Bob Reade frowned. "I didn't know it was as bad as that. But don't worry, Tom. I can take care of myself. It's damned decent of you to come all the way down here to give me the tip-off. I won't forget it. I'm beginning to understand why some of the men up there at the prison would give their right arm for you."

Tom brushed aside the thanks with a sweep of his hand. "That wasn't the only reason I came to town. I have to address a bunch of women who think we ought to install bridle paths for some of the boys to go horseback riding on. Those dames mean well, but they can get your goat."

"Just be careful. I didn't get you by the Parole Board to have somebody kill you. You've the makings of a damned good engineer under that skull of yours."

He shook hands with the younger man, hurried down the narrow, ill-lighted steps and drove quickly to the downtown section. He was puffing slightly as he dropped into the speaker's chair at the long banquet table. Tom fumbled with his collar, looked around at the two score of sedate women until his eyes fastened on the doorway of the big restaurant.

"You seem startled, Mr. Fargo," the hostess at his right whispered. "Is there anything wrong?"

"Do you know that man in the tuxedo standing at the door?" Tom asked.

Mrs. Smithwick looked up, swept the faultlessly dressed figure with her lorgnette and nodded. "Yes, indeed. He is Mr. Anthony Balch and he owns this restaurant. In fact, he actually came to us and offered to allow us to use his place at a very low figure."

"He did, huh?" Tom snorted. "I thought that my eyes were deceiving me, Mrs. Smithwick. You see, Tony graduated from my little college just a few days ago. It's rather a shock to find him working. I knew he bought a restaurant, but I never figured that

he was more than filling the requirements for parole. Well, well."

Tom had no further time to comment. He was called upon to speak, but while he had the floor, his eyes followed Tony steadily. The crook smiled coldly when he caught Tom's gaze fastened on him. Only once did Tony leave the banquet hall and that was for five minutes. Tom finished his speech, bowed to the applause and sat down.

He fidgeted nervously as others took the floor. Tom heard nothing of what they said. An undercurrent of apprehension gripped him. Tom wasn't subject to these hunches very often, but he believed in them. Forty minutes crawled by. Suddenly the doors of the restaurant were thrown wide. Five burly men bustled in. One of them Tom knew for Sergeant Donovan of the Homicide Squad. Donovan's face wasn't pleasant to look upon. Tom tried to get the detective's eye, but Donovan spotted Tony Balch. He signaled his men and they converged on the ex-convict from all sides. Tony saw them coming and stared in astonishment.

"Lift 'em!" Donovan warned brusquely. "Any phony plays and I'll smack you down. Stick out your mitts! You and us are going places."

"But what is this all about?" Tony implored. "I have done nothing. Because I had the ill fortune to spend five years in prison, does that give you cause for this — this action on your part?"

Tony acted well. He seemed a brow-beaten, half frantic man who stood in ardent fear of the police.

"You know what happened," Donovan blurted. "You bumped Robert Reade. You threatened to do it and I always figured you would."

"I—killed Reade?" Tony backed away a step and gasped his horror. "But that cannot be. I have been here — right here, for hours. Last night I was also here. I have witnesses."

"Sure he has," Tom broke in as he stepped close to Donovan. "Hello,

Sergeant. I heard you, of course. When was Reade murdered — and where?"

"Within the hour," Donovan replied. "We got your tip about the trouble they had at the pen so I figured Tony did it. It was a knife job and Tony always was hot on the shiv. Reade was left in a car at Town's End."

"But I have been here," Tony protested. "I have witnesses—"

"Shut up!" Tom snapped. "I hate to do it, Tony, but even for a louse like you, I have to back up your alibi. Tony has been right here, Donovan, for the last two hours. He couldn't possibly have left this restaurant and reached Town's End and back without my noticing he'd been away. Come along, sergeant. Tell me about it."

THEY sat in the big police car outside while Donovan gave the details.

"A passing motorist spotted the body, Tom. It was shoved in the back seat of a stolen car. Whoever bumped the poor guy made him suffer plenty. He sliced him in about a dozen places where it would hurt most, before he jammed the shiv into his heart. Want to see him?"

Tom nodded. "I'll trail you in my own car."

And Donovan was right. Reade's body wasn't a pretty thing to look at. On the first appearance, his murder seemed the handiwork of a maniac. Blood was congealing on the floor of the tonneau and there was even a blob of it up on the roof of the car. Reade had been tied, his arms and legs lashed so that blue marks were left where the ropes had cut deeply. Blood had trickled from the sides of his mouth.

"He was gagged," Tom said. "I wonder why?"

"Because he might have hollered," Donovan retorted dryly. "You know, Tom, you're a good guy and everything, but you ain't no dick. A blind man could have seen that."



Tom grinned. "Perhaps I don't know so much about your work, Donovan, but I do know men. If I hadn't spotted Tony with my own eyes, I'd have sworn he did this. It's just the type of a job he'd perform. I'm going back to town. See you later!"

On the way back, Tom tried to puzzle it out. Tony might have hired some one to do the killing, but that wasn't Tony's method. He was a killer himself, a cowardly, sniveling murderer who would torture to hear his victim scream.

"If he didn't do it himself," Tom reasoned, "he hired somebody . . . Reade was lured out of his room right after I saw him. Maybe there's a clue at his rooming house."

Tom flashed his badge to the woman who owned the place. "Perhaps you know your roomer, Robert Reade, was killed a little while ago," Tom said.

The woman nodded. "I know. They came here and searched his room, the poor lad. But he had nothin'. All the cops did was tear the room around so it will take me all day to fix it up again."

"Did Reade get a phone call—or did some one come after him?" Tom asked her. "I was in his room at seven o'clock. When did he go out?"

"He had a phone call," the woman admitted slowly. "I remember him sayin' he didn't expect any. I heard him say Carthy's Inn, kind of surprised-like and he acted as if maybe he didn't know if he ought to go or not. That's all I know except he was a good lad."

"Thanks," Tom told her.

He had a clue anyway. A meager one that could hardly work out, but there was rugged determination in Tom's character and he tossed no chances to the winds. Deep within him, he had determined to capture the murderer of Bob Reade. True, Reade had served time, but if anyone had reformed, Reade had. He was an engineer and with the right opportunity, would have made something of himself.

It was this that caused Tom's lips to compress tightly. He had believed in Reade; helped him that he might be of some benefit to the world, only to have him murdered in order that a cruel, sadistical taste for revenge might be appeased. This whole case was none of his business. Even if Tony had paid some professional killer to murder Reade, it was a police job and not a parole officer's.

"But I'll take him myself!" Tom muttered while he drove toward the shabbier sections of the city where Carthy's Inn was located. "If only I can prove it!"

CARTHY'S INN proved to be the disreputable place Tom expected he would find. A quick survey from his car told him he was putting his head into a hornet's nest by entering. From where he sat, he recognized the lounging door guard as a three-timer at the prison and a man whose parole Tom had violently objected to. There would be others of his ilk within, but Tom didn't hesitate a second. If a clue to the murderer of Bob Reade was in that place, he meant to get it if he had to combat every convict who had reason to hate him.

Tom loosened the gun in his shoulder holster, pulled his hat down tight and walked with slow steps toward the entrance. The man at the door straightened up. Tom saw his hand flash behind him. A signal was being given.

"Whaddya want?" the guard queried hoarsely. "There ain't no parole jumpers in here."

"No?" Tom replied easily. "Too bad, you mug. I hoped I might find a dozen of 'em. Get out of the way."

"Nothin' doin'," came the growled challenge. "You can't get in here without a pass."

"So?" Tom grinned. His fist flashed quickly and collided with the guard's jaw. Tom eased the half conscious form into the rickety old chair. "You asked to see my pass, mister. How do you like it?"

Tom turned and strode up a flight of steps, opened a narrow door and stepped into a well lighted room. There was a long bar at the further end. Tom walked between the tables without casting so much as a quick glance at the occupants.

"Beer," he ordered and the bartender balked only a second. There was something in Tom's eyes that didn't behoove any good for those who might act contrary to his wishes. A sudden silence settled over the place; a sullen quiet barely broken by the whispers of the men who watched Tom narrowly.

"We oughta plug that guy right now," some one whispered to a companion. "He made me roost four years extra in the can. Said I was no damned good, he did."

"Shh — take it easy," another warned. "I know Tom Fargo. He's fast with his fists and faster with a gat. He ain't so bad anyway. Hell, he yanked me outa solitary once when I was sick. He ain't after us. We got off parole long ago."

Tom, trained by long years of prison supervision, heard every word and smiled a little. Suddenly his smile died away. There was a round shouldered, wizen-faced man at his side drinking glass after glass of straight whisky. He kept his face averted from Tom's gaze. With a quick motion of his hand, he drew a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket and threw it on the bar. It was this bill that made Tom breathe a little faster.

Before the bartender could pick it up, Tom's big hand covered it.

"Hello, Snowy," he nodded to the wizen-faced one. "You've been out of prison just a year. I never knew you to work. How come you can throw twenty-dollar bills around like this?"

As he spoke, Tom thrust one hand into his own pocket, fingered his own thin roll of bills and extracted a twenty. He was able to do this easily because he had only one and it formed the core of the roll. With a swift movement, he picked up the bill Snowy had

dropped and replaced it with his own note.

"What's the matter, Snowy?" Tom queried. "Lost your hearing? I asked you a question."

"You go to hell," came the quick retort. "You're no dick. You can't pinch me. I was off parole six months ago. Lemme alone."

"Sure, you're all right." Tom stuffed the twenty-dollar bill into his coat pocket. "Seen much of your pal, Tony Balch, lately?"

Tom expected some kind of a reaction, but he was hardly prepared for what followed. Snowy, Tom had observed in a glance, was off the needle. He was nervous and deadly as a cobra. When he drew back a step, snarled to reveal yellow, uneven teeth, he did remind Tom of some variety of snake. Snowy's hand darted behind him. When it reappeared, it clutched a gun. But Tom had anticipated this. Before Snowy could bring the gun to bear, Tom leaped for him.

Using both arms, he slammed the little crook hard against the bar and sent his hands whacking upon the bar. Tom fastened a grip on the gun hand; twisted it slowly until Snowy began to whimper.

"Drop that gun, you rat," Tom grated. "Drop it before I break your wrist."

The gun fell to the bar top. With a grin, Tom yanked his prisoner toward him and prepared to search the man. There was a dull crack and the lights winked out. A shot had come from the room behind the bar. Some one had shattered the fuse box with a bullet.

Tom pulled his prisoner floorward. Snowy struggled futilely. He opened his mouth and raised a shout.

"Over here!" he yelled. "In front of the bar."

Tom cracked him smartly on the point of the jaw, picked him up and carried him a dozen feet away. His own gun was in his hand. The crooks were no longer passive. Those who hated Tom were ready to slay him on sight. The blanket of darkness was

more of a safeguard to Tom than an impediment. He knew the way to the front door; knew just how many ex-convicts would be barring his way.

There was a telephone hooked to the wall just behind the bar. If he could reach that! He made certain Snowy was still unconscious, shoved him against the wall and crawled forward. So far only one shot had been fired and that from somewhere behind this barroom. No one would have heard it. Before any inquisitive patrolman might stop in to find out why no lights were on, Tom would be riddled with bullets. He heard a hoarse whisper to his left.

"You guys know this screw," some one said in a rasping voice. "He put all of us on the rack. Now let's fix him —for good. We'll dump his body in the river. You guys that are game, spread out. I'm gonna turn a flashlight loose. When you see the mug, bump him!"

TOM crouched, gun ready for instant action. He guessed the exact location of the phone, sprang forward a half dozen steps and vaulted the bar.

Thick arms closed about him, but before his captor could raise an alarm, Tom jabbed a hard right to the pit of his stomach, doubled him up and cracked a second blow to the face. The arms fell limply away. Tom's exploring hands found the telephone. He lifted the receiver, let it hang by its cord and raised his gun close to the instrument. He dialed the operator and snapped two quick shots that must have almost blown the operator's ear drums out.

The jabbing finger of a flashlight swept the bar. Tom dropped behind it. The light traveled on. He began to perspire. In a second it would reveal Snowy. That would end in but one thing and Tom needed Snowy badly.

He grabbed a bottle from the bar and sent it hurtling to his right. It crashed against the wall. Instantly the flash swept toward the sound. Tom came around the end of the bar like

a halfback gripping the ball and looking for a clear field. He scattered two men with his powerful shoulders, reached Snowy and lifted him up. There was only one place of safety—behind the bar.

"He's over here," some one yelled and the flashlight swept toward Tom. This beam of white light would become a death ray if it centered on him. Once he was brought into relief, a dozen gangland guns would speak their vicious messages of doom.

He fired once in the direction of the light. It winked out instantly. But the streak of flame from his own gun made him a target. Lead slammed into the wall beside him. Tom made for the protection of the bar again. Some one tried to stop him. Tom snapped a short blow that floored the shadowy hulk of his opponent.

A siren's wail caused a momentary silence. Then feet scurried away. Men raced for every exit, running like rats before a fire. In one minute, Tom and Snowy were alone in the big room.

Flashlights seared the darkness. A tense voice demanded an explanation and a quick release of the gun Tom still gripped. He let it thud to the floor.

"An' keep it there!" the patrolman ordered. "What the devil is goin' on here anyway? It looks like a tornado hit this dump."

"I'm Tom Fargo, Parole Officer," Tom stood up. "This man is my prisoner. Some one put out the lights in here. I've got to get away quickly. Will you take charge of this man?"

"Sure I will, but maybe it'll be best if you wait for Donovan. He's on his way right now. We met him outside and he's throwin' a cordon around the place."

Donovan rushed into the barroom. He quickly reached Tom's side, breathless and crimson of face.

"I thought you'd get into trouble, Tom," he panted. "That landlady at Reade's rooming house told me you'd questioned her. I came as fast as I

(Continued on page 106)

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(Continued from page 104)

could. This is a hell of a place for a parole guy to stick his nose into. It's the toughest spot in town."

"You're not telling me much." Tom grinned. "But if we can get Snowy to talk, I bet we've got Balch. Got him cold, Donovan. Help me get Snowy out of here. We've got to work fast now."

Snowy was groggy but able to stand. Tom passed an arm around him and forced him down the steps and across the sidewalk toward the police car. Donovan was just ahead of them.

A Tommy-gun spoke, flat and deadly. Snowy's body gave a lurch as his head was whipped backward by the force of the slugs. Like a flash, Tom dropped to the pavement, but not quickly enough. The gun crackled again and a bullet ripped into the flesh of his right shoulder, high up.

"Surround that house!" Donovan was shouting orders. "There's a killer in there. Get going!"

He dropped beside Tom. "Are you hit bad?" he asked. "Don't worry, we'll get the guy who shot you."

Tom stood up weakly, holding Donovan's arm for support. He looked down at Snowy.

"There goes our witness," he groaned. "I believe I know how that murder was done, Donovan. Tony Balch killed Reade. Listen—he paid Snowy to lure Reade to this place. Snowy made Reade a prisoner, stuck him in the back of that car and drove him to the alley in back of Tony's restaurant. Tony went out long enough to jab Reade a few times before he finally sent his knife through his heart. Then Snowy drove the body to Town's End and left it there."

"Holy Smoke!" Donovan cried. "You got it, Tom. Sure that's the way he musta done it. But—can you prove it?"

"I think so," Tom replied, "but it must have been Tony hiding in there who killed Snowy and tried to get me. Bet he's on his way back to the restaurant to establish an alibi by this time. It's too late for the place to be

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 106)

open, but if you found him in a warm bed when you go looking for him, he could swear he was there all the time. Maybe he'll even have a chance to get some of his pals in on it—say he was in a card game or something. I want to borrow this squad car, Donovan. How about it?"

"Sure," Donovan agreed. "And I'll go with you."

"No," Tom said. "Stay here in case your men do smoke him out. This is my job anyway. Bob Reade was a friend of mine. Tony killed him and if I can pin it on him, I'll do so."

"But listen, Tom," Donovan implored. "This ain't your work. Hell, man, it's a cop's job to tackle that rat."

Tom stepped on the starter of the car. "Bob Reade was a friend of mine. He saved many men from death not so long ago. Saved them and kept quiet about it even though he might have profited. Only a real man could do such a thing, and Balch is going to pay for killing him. This has become a personal matter now. See you later."

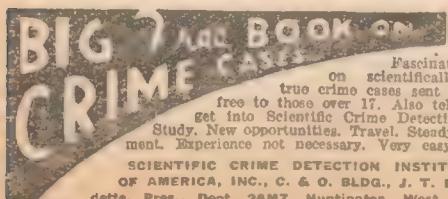
TOM snapped home the siren switch and raced toward the restaurant which Balch owned. He cut the siren as he neared it, swung to the curb a block away and proceeded the remaining distance on foot.

He knew what he was going into. Tony would shoot him on sight, would probably be lurking somewhere in the shadows of the restaurant.

He skirted the building, hurried down an alley and reached the back door. This was locked, but Tom knew more than one trick.

"What's the use of having some of the best crooks in the country as your friends if you can't learn a little from them?" he told himself while he removed a bunch of keys from his pocket. He tried four. A fifth one turned the lock a little. He removed it, used a tiny file on one portion of its design and tried again. This time the

(Continued on page 110)



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(Continued from page 108)

door swung wide. He stepped in quickly, moving with all the agility at his command.

From somewhere in the building, he could hear a voice. It was Tony Balch's and it was crammed with anxiety and desperation. Tom paused only long enough to get the gist of the one-sided phone conversation.

"... and don't forget the time," Tony warned. "It's two o'clock now. We were together from midnight until now. Got that okay? Swell! I—"

"You might as well hang up," Tom said calmly. "An alibi won't do you much good."

Tony dropped the receiver, turned swiftly and with the same motion whipped a gun from a holster.

Both men fired simultaneously. Tom took the slug in his already wounded shoulder, but he hardly felt the pain. Tony Balch stared down at a hand dripping blood and a gun that had fallen to the floor when Tom's bullet tore it away from his grasp.

"Raise 'em, Tony," Tom warned. "This is the end of all things for you. I warned you strongly enough. Now you're coming back to prison—and the chair!"

"You wouldn't say that if you didn't hold that gat," Tony rasped. "You're like any other kind of cop. If you got a gat, you talk big."

Tom smiled just a little and tossed his gun far into the big room. Instantly Tony's sound hand darted behind his neck and came away with a long, glittering knife that had been secreted there in a scabbard. Foul oaths ripped from his lips and he came forward like a beast descending for the kill.

"So I'm gonna hit the chair, huh?" he snarled. "If I do, you won't be there. You're gonna get the same thing that damned Reade guy got. I'll slit you to pieces."

His knife came down in a flash, but it found only air for its mark. Tom had sidestepped quickly. Only his left arm was good, but there was power behind it and the blow he sent smack-

ing against Tony's head knocked the murderer off his feet.

He scrambled up again, screamed in rage and poised the knife for a throw. Tom saw death staring him full in the face. Tony was an expert at this sort of murder. Tom lunged forward, head down and his sound arm reaching out. The knife whizzed a fraction of an inch over his head. On he went, like a charging bull. Tony's eyes widened in fear. He turned suddenly and began to race for the door.

Tom hurled himself at the man, hit him hard just below the knees and sent him sprawling. With his left fist, he hammered two husky blows to the face. Tony raised his arms, encircled Tom's throat with his fingers and began to squeeze.

Tom smashed one more blow that made Tony groggy. "That's for Bob Reade," Tom said hoarsely. "And this is—for me!"

Tony's head snapped backward. His eyes glazed and his body went limp. Tom pulled handcuffs from under his coat, clamped them in place and got up only to sink weakly into a chair.

Some one ran down the alley outside the door. At the same time a terrific hammering sounded from the front of the restaurant. Donovan hurried in, gun ready for instant action. He saw Tony on the floor, jammed his gun into his pocket again and grinned.

"A mighty nice job, Tom," he commended. "I couldn't do better myself. You got him all right. Now—can you convict him?"

TOM nodded. "I heard him trying to create an alibi for himself and when he figured he had the upper hand, he boasted I'd get what he gave Reade. But we won't need either of those confessions. I've got evidence enough in my pocket right now."

"Evidence?" Donovan scowled. "I don't know anything about that, do I?"

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"Tony queered himself. When he left prison last week, I gave him the customary twenty dollars that the state allows. Tony laughed, folded it up and stuck it in his vest pocket. On a hunch, I'd marked that bill. Tonight I saw Snowy pass that bill to the bartender at Carthy's place. Tony paid Snowy off with that bill as part of the money. It would have made a great laugh in the underworld—bumping a man he hated with money given him by the State when he left prison. Tony was always like that — looking for some sardonic feature that would elevate him to the station of a wise guy among his pals."

"But how did you guess that Tony bumped Reade in the alley outside this restaurant?"

"First, Tony went out of his way to get the women's club to hold their meeting here at his place tonight. He knew I was to speak and that would provide him with an unshatterable alibi.

"Then, too, Snowy drove the body away too fast. It bumped all over the back of the car. There was blood high on the doors, on the roof, the seat—all over. That's why I was certain the body had been driven around a lot—after Reade was driven here to be butchered.

"You can take Tony now, Donovan. I'm going to get my shoulder fixed up. Got to help a man get by the parole board in the morning."

"Okay, Tom," Donovan yanked the half conscious form of Tony upright, "but this is one guy you won't have to worry about. The only parole he'll get is in hell."





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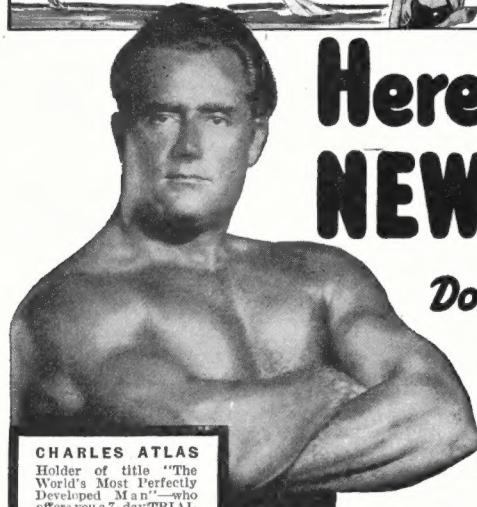
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